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Editorial

Faith & Worship has from time to time reprinted classic arguments from writers of the past in favour of the Book of Common Prayer or of set forms of liturgy—reminders of the grounds for using a prescribed form of words in public worship. No doubt many of the reasons given are familiar and have often been used before, but there is some value in bringing them before ourselves afresh in the form in which they have struck individual minds of distinction. J.C. Ryle’s ‘Thoughts on the Prayer Book’, in the present issue, is a characteristically pithy and forthright piece of work, and, so far as at least the first two parts are concerned, there is nothing in it that would not receive the assent of Anglicans of various schools. As the leading Evangelical bishop of his day he writes in the tradition of Charles Simeon (1759-1836)—the tradition of what might be called ‘Prayer Book Evangelicals’, on the analogy of ‘Prayer Book Catholics’¹. Before Simeon it was the Evangelical clergy who were most likely to go liturgically off-piste; in the later nineteenth century it was the Anglo-Catholics. Today there is no piste visible.

The third part of Ryle’s ‘Thoughts’ is perhaps less satisfactory in one respect. His main point is that the principle of the Prayer Book is ‘to suppose all members of the Church to be in reality what they are in profession’—‘true believers in Christ’.

This principle is that on which the *Communion Office and Confirmation Service* are evidently framed. I suppose that no intelligent person would seriously maintain that all the communicants who say, ‘the remembrance of our sins is grievous and the burden of them is intolerable’ do really feel and mean what they say! You have only to search their characters and lives, and you soon find that many of them feel nothing of the kind. So also I presume no one of common sense really believes that all the young persons, who are confirmed, do really think that they are ‘bound to believe and do’ what they profess, when they say in reply to the Bishop’s question, ‘I do’. Too many, it may be feared, never think at all. But in both cases the Prayer-book puts in the mouths of those who are confirmed or come to the table, the language they ought to use, on the great ruling principle

1 Ryle virtually quotes Simeon, though without acknowledgement. Ryle: ‘If all men prayed always, as some men do sometimes, there would be nothing better than extempore prayer’. Simeon: ‘If all men could pray at all times, as some men can sometimes, then indeed we might prefer extempore to pre-composed prayers’.

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of charitable supposition. But it does not in the least follow that all is right because the language is used.

Of course this is true, so far as it goes; but perhaps it makes too brusque a distinction between ‘believers’ on the one hand and those who seem fated to not ‘mean what they say’ or ‘never think at all’ on the other, too little allowance for what Simeon always saw as the converting power of the liturgy itself. Simeon ‘regarded public worship as a form of preaching—the prayers of the church were a proclamation of the gospel. Therefore it was not just preaching that was a converting ordinance’.²

But Ryle nonetheless speaks repeatedly, as in the passage just quoted, of the liturgy putting ‘words in the mouth’ of those who use it. ‘The Church puts in the mouth of her worshipping people the sentiments and language they ought to use, and if they do not come up to its high standard the fault is theirs, not hers.’ ‘The people who use the words the liturgy puts into their mouths, are supposed to be believers.’ If there is a biblical echo here it is somewhat ambiguous—God is said in the Old Testament to ‘put words’ into the mouths of his prophets: ‘Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth’ (Jeremiah 1.9).³ But there is also, by contrast, the everyday idiom (perhaps obliquely derived from the Scriptures), which is one of refusal or interference (‘Don’t put words in my mouth!’). Perhaps these associations, vaguely present, suggest the *strangeness* of liturgical worship—the words I use are not my own; they imply a self, a ‘me’, which perhaps I don’t yet recognise or accept, which is still in process of formation, which I may even be tempted to repudiate. And should not the ‘words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart’ be not only, severally, acceptable to God, but in agreement with each other? If these are the ‘sentiments and language [I] ought to use’, can I sincerely do so? Or again may it not be that as I continue to use the words with a serious intention they do in time become my words, known ‘by heart’ and no longer only ‘in my mouth’ as something introduced or imposed from without?

Perhaps Ryle does hint at these complexities, but whether he does or not they do have a bearing on another point he makes:

But those who drew up the Prayer-book never meant to assert that all who were members of the Church of England were actually and really true Christians. On the contrary, they tell us expressly in the

2 Andrew Atherstone, *Charles Simeon on The Excellence of the Liturgy*, Joint Liturgical Studies 72 (Norwich 2011).

3 Cf. ‘I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him’ (Deuteronomy 18.18). ‘And thou [Moses] shalt speak unto him [Aaron], and put words in his mouth’ (Exodus 4.15).

Articles, that 'in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good'. But they held that if forms of devotion were drawn up at all, they must be drawn up on the supposition that those who used them were real Christians, and not false ones. And in so doing I think they were quite right. *A liturgy for unbelievers and unconverted men would be unreasonable, and practically useless. The part of the congregation for whom it was meant would care little or nothing for any liturgy at all. The holy and believing part of the congregation would find its language entirely unsuited to them.* [italics added]

Admittedly Ryle was writing at a time when there was much less 'flexibility' in worship than now, and when the population generally—whether wheat or tares—was more conversant with the idea of public worship. There was more nominal adherence to the Church and a wider field of captive audiences (in schools and universities for example). The opportunity to devise services for 'unbelievers and unconverted men' hardly existed. Nowadays, however, when the Church finds itself confronted with a wall of ignorance and generations of the 'unchurched' the temptation is to reach out by means of worship of which the Christian content is made as bland and undemanding as possible. But Ryle was right that such services are unsatisfactory for the regular worshippers who attend out of a feeling that they should support the new 'initiative'—they may well 'find its language entirely unsuited to them'. It is now they who may find words put in their mouths which give no nourishment and may even be of questionable orthodoxy. At best they may manage a kind of proxy worship, praying that this occasion may bear fruit in the future. The idea that the liturgy itself might have a 'converting power', and the fact that even quite recently people were attracted to the Church of England by its formal worship⁴ seem to have been forgotten. The hope that 'fresh Expressions' might be a stepping stone or bridge to the full worshipping life of 'inherited church' has apparently been shelved.

It is a cruel dilemma, emblematic of the Church's current plight. The diminishing number of mostly elderly persons who have remained loyal to the Church of England are footing the bill for whatever new initiatives the central church deems likely to promote recovery. The new model is one of 'mixed ecology'. The overworked incumbent is expected to explore new 'ways of being church' without completely alienating those whom the Church itself has, in an earlier phase, deliberately formed as liturgical persons.

⁴ See, for example, various witnesses in *Why I Am Still an Anglican*, Ed. Caroline Chartres, 2007, and Rachel Trickett 'Cranmer Not Irrelevant' in *No Alternative: The Prayer Book Controversy*, Ed. David Martin and Peter Mullen, 1981.

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The ensuing tensions are described in a recent report⁵ from the viewpoint of those exercising this ‘mixed ecology’ ministry. The ‘inherited’ congregation is often seen primarily as an obstacle:

When asked about their greatest frustrations the most common responses were the attitudes of their inherited congregation/s and their reluctance to change, particularly when they were newly in post. Several spoke of conflict, misunderstanding and feeling isolated in their first couple of years. Some described being aggressively criticised or challenged. Others had lost congregants or been disappointed at the lack of mature discipleship they encountered. For some, needing to have difficult conversations and manage conflict was not a problem, for others it was emotionally costly, but they saw it as necessary, however there were also those for whom it was extremely challenging and emotionally draining. At one level managing their inherited congregation and its expectations was just as hard – if not more so – than the pioneering aspects of their ministry.

The enthusiasm of these mostly younger clergy is admirable. Whether the analysis of the Church’s problems which lies behind their activity is correct is another matter. But on any view trying to ride two horses at once is an exhausting business, and it is not surprising, given their assumptions, that much of what is said in the report about existing congregations carries a note of barely-concealed hostility.

It is difficult to see what happy outcome there can be to all this. There are signs that the senior leadership of the Church is, in its desperation, falling prey to magical thinking. In the latest issue of the *Church Times* to hand as I write we are told that ‘the establishment of 10,000 new, predominantly lay-led churches in the next ten years is among the ambitious targets that will be discussed at the General Synod this month’.⁶ That works out at nearly twenty new ‘church plants’ every week over the ten-year period! It is difficult to know how to describe this other than as delusional—the fantasy of an institution determined to hypnotise itself with ever more luxuriant efflorescences of jargon while claiming to be ‘bolder and simpler’.

These depressing reflections have taken us a long way from the plain-speaking of Bishop Ryle. But in these dispiriting times some will be all the more determined to hold fast the sound words of the Prayer Book, which in Ryle’s words ‘contains so many excellencies’.

John Scrivener

⁵ *The Mixed Ecologist: Experiences of Mixed Ecology Ministry in the Church of England*, May 2021. The report is ‘Focussed Study 2’ in the Living Ministry research project (see the C of E website).

⁶ ‘Vision and Strategy update for Synod’, *Church Times* 2 July 2021, p.3.

Training Incumbents and The Book of Common Prayer

GREG SMITH AND LESLIE J FRANCIS

Introduction

The changing role of training incumbents

Training for ordained ministry within the Church of England has undergone considerable shifts during the past fifty years. Although the role of the training incumbent has remained a constant feature, this role has taken on a new significance and a revised set of expectations in the twenty-first century. In the 1970s there was a clear distinction between initial ministerial education rooted in a theological college and post-ordination training rooted in a parish-based curacy. At that time the emphasis during the college-based experience was placed on academic and theological education, while the emphasis during the curacy was placed on the practical aspects of ministry. On ordination to the diaconate, the curate was placed under the oversight of an experienced vicar or rector designated as training incumbent.

During the early years of the twenty-first century the changing role of the training incumbent and the increasing professionalisation of that role have been reflected in the reconceptualization of Initial Ministerial Education (IME) to embrace two distinct but connected phases. Phase one IME (years 1-3) remains within a theological college (generally for full-time training) or within a theological course (generally for part-time training) and embraces aspects of practical ministerial formation within church and other context-based placements. Phase two IME (years 4-7) is placed within the oversight of the diocese and in the hands of a designated training incumbent.

Such changes in the role of training incumbents was heralded by the report, *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church*¹, colloquially known as *The Hind Report*. This significant document identified the need for an overhaul of attitudes to parish-based training. In turn, this report was succeeded by *Shaping the Future*², which attempted the important task of bringing further rigour and clarity to the selection of training

1 Archbishops' Council, (2003) *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church*. London: Church House Publishing.

2 Archbishops' Council (2006). *Shaping the Future: New Patterns of Training for Lay and Ordained*. London: Church House Publishing.

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incumbents. The two reports moved away from the use of busy parishes that needed an extra pair of hands, and towards appointing reflective practitioners, who could demonstrate an aptitude for the role.

Researching the experience of curates

The importance of the training incumbent for shaping the experience of curates was highlighted in two key studies that used qualitative research methods. For the first of these studies, conducted before the implementation of the Hind report, Burgess chose the title *Into Deep Water*³. He found that half of his sample of twenty curates believed that they had an unsatisfactory relationship with their training incumbent. From the interviews, Burgess identified what he described as five common ‘pathologies of training’⁴: a lack of preparation before and feedback by the incumbent after a task; a lack of personal organisation and professionalism on the part of the incumbent; unwillingness to share tasks or recognise curates’ abilities; personal remoteness or hostility; and inappropriate attitude toward the curate. In the second of these studies, Tilley⁵ drew on the qualitative responses that thirty-four curates added to a survey designed to discover how curates perceived that training incumbents conformed to the new criteria proposed by the Church of England. From these data Tilley concluded that these new data provided only partial support for Burgess’ five pathologies. In response to the statement ‘I would recommend my training incumbent to other ordinands’, 54% endorsed it. In other words, the situation may have been improving, if only slightly

Building on these two qualitative studies, two subsequent quantitative studies have generated further insights into the way in which curates perceive the relationship with their training incumbent. For the first of these studies, conducted among ninety-eight curates, Tilley, Francis, Robbins, and Jones⁶ explored curates’ perception of the expectations placed on them by their training incumbent through the lens of psychological type theory. Then they tested the extent to which these perceived expectations were related to the psychological type profile of the curates themselves or to the psychological type profile of their training incumbent, using data provided by the Myers-Briggs Type

3 Burgess, N. (1998). *Into Deep Water: The Experience of Curates in the Church of England*. Rattlesden: Kevin Mayhew.

4 *Ibid.* p.76.

5 Tilley, D. R. (2007). ‘Are Curates Trained Properly? Following up Burgess’s Pathologies’. *Journal of Adult Theological Education*, 4, 149-164. doi.org/10.1558/jate2007v4i2.149

6 Tilley, D., Francis, L. J., Robbins M., & Jones, S. H. (2011). ‘Apprentice Clergy? The Relationship between Expectations in Ministry and the Psychological Type Profile of Training Incumbents and Curates in the Church of England’. *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 22, 286-305. doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004207271.i-360.65

Indicator⁷. The data demonstrated that the ministry expectations placed on curates were significantly related to the psychological type profile of the training incumbent, but not to the psychological type profile of the curates. These findings suggest that training incumbents were more likely to be shaping curates in their own image, rather than developing the curate's own preferred disposition for ministry.

For the second of these studies, conducted among 416 pairs of curates and training incumbents, Smith and Francis (under review)⁸ explored the influence of personal, religious, and psychological characteristics of both the curate and the training incumbent in predicting curates' positive attitude toward the training incumbent. The data demonstrated that religious factors (Catholic or Evangelical, Liberal or Conservative, Charismatic or not Charismatic) were not significant. However, both personal and psychological factors of the curates themselves were significant. The curates who rated their training incumbent more highly were older and more emotionally stable. Personal factors were also significant for the training incumbents, as well as one psychological factor. The curates rated more highly the experience of working with younger training incumbents; and with training incumbents who expressed a preference for intuition over sensing. The most satisfactory experience of curacy was associated with older and emotionally stable curates working with younger training incumbents.

Research question

Against this background, it is hypothesised that training incumbents may have an impact on the exposure of their curates to The Book of Common Prayer and that there may be specific characteristics of training incumbents and of curates that predispose exposure to The Book of Common Prayer. In the light of previous research, the present study takes into account three categories of potentially predisposing characteristics: personal characteristics, psychological characteristics, and religious characteristics.

The two core personal characteristics taken into consideration in the training relationship between curates and training incumbents by Smith and Francis were sex and age, both of the curate and of the training incumbent. Both sets of data are accessible through surveys completed by curates. In the light of studies that report greater attraction for older forms of services among older people⁹, it is hypothesised that the older

7 Myers, I. B., & McCaulley, M. H. (1985). *Manual: A Guide to the Development and Use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

8 Smith, G., & Francis, L. J. (under review). 'My training Incumbent Did a good Job: An Empirical Investigation of Personal, Religious, and Psychological Factors Shaping Curates' Evaluation of their Training Incumbent within the Anglican Church in England and Wales'.

9 Francis, L. J., Robbins, M., & Astley, J. (2005). *Fragmented Faith? Exposing the Fault-lines in the Church of England*. Carlisle: Paternoster.

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curates and older training incumbents may give greater exposure to The Book of Common Prayer.

The psychological characteristics taken into consideration by Tilley (2007) and by Smith and Francis (under review) are those proposed by psychological-type theory and accessed by instruments like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Francis Psychological Type Scales¹⁰. These instruments distinguish between introversion and extraversion, between sensing and intuition, between thinking and feeling, and between judging and perceiving. The limitation of a study conducted only among curates is that psychological data will not be available for training incumbents. In the light of studies that report more conservative attitudes among sensing types than among intuitive types¹¹, it is hypothesised that curates who prefer sensing may be given greater exposure to The Book of Common Prayer.

The religious characteristics taken into consideration by Smith and Francis are those refined and measured by Randall¹² and further developed by Village¹³. These measures distinguish between church orientation (Catholic and Evangelical), and theological orientation (Liberal and Conservative). In the light of studies that report the association between these three measures and religious beliefs and practices¹⁴ it is hypothesised that curates who identify as conservative may be given greater exposure to The Book of Common Prayer.

Method

Procedure

On two successive years (2018, 2019) questionnaires were sent to all curates serving within the mainland dioceses of the Church of England shortly after they had been ordained to the priesthood. The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and that no personal information would be stored. All told, 1392 surveys were mailed to curates and 404 responses were received, making a response rate of 29%.

10 Francis, L. J. (2005). *Faith and Psychology: Personality, Religion and the Individual*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

11 Ross, C. F. J., & Francis, L. J. (2020). *Personality, Religion, and Leadership: The Spiritual Dimensions of Psychological Type Theory*. New York: Lexington Books.

12 Randall, K. (2005). *Evangelicals Etcetera: Conflict and Conviction in the Church of England's Parties*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

13 Village, A. (2012). 'English Anglicanism: Construct Validity of a Scale of Anglo-Catholic versus Evangelical Self-identification'. In F.-V. Anthony & H.-G. Ziebertz (Eds.), *Religious Identity and National Heritage: Empirical-Theological Perspectives* (pp. 93-122). Leiden: Brill. Village, A. (2013). 'Traditions within the Church of England and Psychological Type: A study among the Clergy'. *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 26, 22-44. doi.org/10.1163/15709256-12341252

14 Village, A. (2013). 'Traditions within the Church of England and Psychological Type: A study among the Clergy'. *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 26, 22-44. doi.org/10.1163/15709256-12341252

Instrument

Personal factors of curates and training incumbents were assessed by two fixed choice questions. Sex was coded: male (1), female (2). Age was coded: under 30 (1), 30-39 (2), 40-49 (3), 50-59 (4), 60 and over (5).

Psychological factors of curates and training incumbents were assessed by the Francis Psychological Type and Emotional Temperament Scales (FPTETS). This fifty-item instrument comprises the four sets of ten forced-choice items proposed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales (FPTS)¹⁵: related to each of the four components of psychological type theory: orientation (extraversion or introversion), perceiving process (sensing or intuition), judging process (thinking or feeling), and attitude toward the outer world (judging or perceiving). Additionally, the FPTETS contains a fifth set of ten forced-choice items designed to assess emotionality.

Religious factors of curates and training incumbents were assessed by the set of two seven-point semantic grids developed from Randall¹⁶ designed to assess church orientation (anchored by the poles of Catholic and Evangelical), and theological orientation (anchored by the poles of Liberal and Conservative).

Curates' evaluation of their exposure to *The Book of Common Prayer* was assessed by two items: My training incumbent has helped me to understand *The Book of Common Prayer*; My training incumbent has helped me to use *The Book of Common Prayer*. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale: disagree strongly (1), disagree (2), not certain (3), agree (4), and agree strongly (5).

Participants

Of the 404 curates who participated in the survey, 199 were male, 204 were female, and one preferred not to say; thirty were under the age of thirty, ninety-nine were in their thirties, eighty-nine in their forties, 125 in their fifties, and sixty-one were aged sixty or over; 363 identified as white British, twenty-two as white other, ten as black, four as Asian, two as other, and three preferred not to say; 255 were ordained into stipendiary ministry, 114 into non-stipendiary ministry, twenty into ordained local ministry, ten into pioneer ministry, two into ministry in secular employment, and three preferred not to say.

Analysis

Analysis was undertaken using the SPSS statistical package, employing the frequency, correlation, and reliability routines.

15 Francis, L. J. (2005). *Faith and Psychology: Personality, Religion and the Individual*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd. Francis, L. J., Laycock, P., & Brewster, C. (2017). 'Exploring the factor structure of the Francis Psychological Type Scales (FPTS) among a sample of Anglican clergy in England'. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 20, 930-941. doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2017.1375469

16 Op.cit.

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Results

Table 1

Perceptions of exposure to The Book of Common Prayer

	Yes %	? %	No ?
My training incumbent has helped me to understand The Book of Common Prayer	34	16	50
My training incumbent has helped me to use The Book of Common Prayer	44	13	44

Note: Yes = sum of agree strongly and agree responses
? = not certain responses
No = sum of disagree strongly and disagree responses

Table 1 presents the percentage endorsement for the two items assessing the curates' perceptions of their exposure to The Book of Common Prayer by their training incumbent. These data demonstrate that 44% of curates felt that their training incumbent had helped them to use The Book of Common Prayer and that the proportion dropped to 34% of curates who felt that their training incumbent had helped them to understand The Book of Common Prayer.

Table 2

Correlations with exposure to The Book of Common Prayer

	Item 1 r	Item 2 r
<i>Personal characteristics</i>		
Sex of curate	-.06	-.03
Age of curate	.06	.08
Sex of training incumbent	.03	.00
Age of training incumbent	.12*	.12*
<i>Psychological characteristics</i>		
Introversion preference	-.01	-.02
Sensing preference	.04	.02

Feeling preference	.01	.03
Judging preference	-.02	-.04
<i>Theological characteristics</i>		
Catholic – Evangelical	-.08	-.03
Liberal – Conservative	-.04	-.04

Note: item 1: My training incumbent has helped me to understand
 The Book of Common Prayer
 item 2: My training incumbent has helped to use The Book
 of Common Prayer
 * $p < .05$

Table 2 presents the correlations between these two items assessing the curates’ perceptions of their exposure to The Book of Common Prayer by their training incumbent and the sets of personal characteristics, psychological characteristics, and religious characteristics. These data demonstrate that only one of the twelve predictor variables is statistically significant and that this variable is the age of the training incumbent, as calculated by their curates. Older training incumbents are more likely than younger training incumbents to give their curates exposure to The Book of Common Prayer.

Discussion and conclusion

The present paper set out to test a set of hypotheses concerning the personal, psychological, and religious characteristics that may predispose curates to exposure to The Book of Common Prayer by their training incumbent. These hypotheses were tested on data provided by 404 curates ordained as priests during 2017 and 2018.

Neither of the two personal characteristics of the curates considered by the study was statistically significant. The hypothesis that older curates would have sought more exposure to The Book of Common Prayer was not supported. Neither was there significant difference between the experience of male and female curates.

None of the four psychological characteristics of the curates considered by the study was statistically significant. The hypothesis that curates who preferred sensing over intuition would have sought more exposure to The Book of Common Prayer was not supported. Neither were there significant differences between introverts and extraverts, between feeling types and thinking types, or between judging types and perceiving types among the curates.

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Neither of the two theological characteristics of the curates considered by the study was statistically significant. The hypothesis that curates who rated themselves as conservative would have sought more exposure to The Book of Common Prayer was not supported. Neither was there significant difference between curates who rated themselves as Anglo-Catholic and curates who rated themselves as Evangelicals.

However, the personal characteristics of the training incumbents emerged as a significant predictor of their curate's exposure to The Book of Common Prayer. Curates working with older training incumbents reported more exposure to The Book of Common Prayer, both in terms of being helped to use The Book of Common Prayer and in terms of being helped to understand The Book of Common Prayer.

Conclusion

The present study was designed to uncover the extent to which curates ordained as priests in 2017 and 2018 had been exposed to The Book of Common Prayer by their training incumbent and to identify the personal, psychological, and religious characteristics that predict individual differences in the extent of their exposure. Two primary conclusions emerge from the findings of this investigation.

The first conclusion is that well under half of the curates (44%) felt that their training incumbent had helped them to use The Book of Common Prayer, and that only one third of the curates (34%) felt that their training incumbent had helped them to understand The Book of Common Prayer.

The second conclusion is that individual differences in the levels of curates' exposure to The Book of Common Prayer is not in their hands but in the hands of the training incumbent.

There are limitations within the present study that could be addressed by further research. In the present study, just two items were included to explore issues associated with The Book of Common Prayer. In future studies, the range of issues could be and should be expanded. In the present study, only the views of curates were canvassed and not those of training incumbents. This was because the Church of England invoked data protection as a barrier to disclosing information about both curates and training incumbents. We created our mailing list from the names of those ordained as published in the *Church Times*. We had no means for identifying the names of training incumbents.

There are practical implications from this research for the Prayer Book Society. Alongside creating links with ordinands and with the providers of ministerial training through colleges and courses, it may be wise to try to create links with the real gate-keepers, that is training incumbents.

Devices and Desires: Corporate Confession in The Book of Common Prayer

ANDREW ATHERSTONE

It is impossible to pray with the Book of Common Prayer without immediately noticing the heavy emphasis on penitence which runs through all the liturgies.¹ They are very serious about human sin and constantly call us to repent, to come to Jesus Christ for mercy and forgiveness, and to put our faith in God. This Prayer Book motif is written loud and clear. In the baptism liturgy, we learn that we are ‘conceived and born in sin’; in the wedding liturgy, that marriage is ‘a remedy against sin’; in the burial liturgy, that death delivers us ‘out of the miseries of this sinful world’. Again and again, the Prayer Book emphasises the depths of human despair and the terrible plight in which we find ourselves in this broken and fallen world. Yet it also celebrates the glorious grace and mercy of God, and the redeeming power of the gospel.

The architects of these liturgies, like Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, realized that we cannot grasp the good news about salvation through Christ until we first appreciate the bad news of what it means to be living in the grip of sin. If sin is deleted from our explanations of the Christian message, then the gospel loses its power. Therefore confession and absolution are writ large throughout the Book of Common Prayer. A life of repentance means, of course, much more than just ‘saying sorry’—it involves turning away from sin and turning to God, with all the radical transformation in attitude and actions that such a momentous change entails. It is impossible to turn to Jesus and yet stay in our sins. In the Bible, the call to repent and the call to believe in Jesus Christ are inseparably linked.

One of the chief ways we vocalize repentance is through confession. This paper expounds the Prayer Book pattern for corporate confession,

¹ A shorter version of this paper was delivered as one of the Prayer Book Society’s 2021 Lent Lectures. Some of these ideas also appear in Andrew Atherstone, *Confessing Our Sins* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2004).

which has three key liturgical components—invitation, confession, and absolution.²

1) Invitation

In contemporary, or improvised, worship the invitation to confession is often forgotten completely. Or it is reduced to a barren stage direction, ‘now let’s all say the confession together’. But, if given careful thought, the invitation has great potential to focus the minds of the congregation on why, and how, we should confess our sins. The Prayer Book, never perfunctory, makes the most of this opportunity.

Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer open with wonderful invitations from Scripture—the call of the prophets, the psalms, the apostles, and of Jesus Christ himself—to repent of our sins and return to the Lord. A multitude of Scripture texts could have been chosen. We are not offered just one or two, but a sample of eleven (eight from the Old Testament, three from the New Testament), and it could have been eleven hundred. They speak of our wicked rebellion, provoking God’s judgment and anger, but also of his abundant grace and mercy. The first and last in this penitential catena include a glorious promise. The first, from Ezekiel, assures us that if we turn from our wickedness, we shall save our lives. The last, from 1 John, tells us that that if we confess our sins, we shall be forgiven and cleansed. Beginning the liturgy in this way with Scripture is a highly significant liturgical strategy. We do not open our public worship with human words, but with God’s Word. We are not led to confession by the minister browbeating and terrorizing us, though some foolish pastors and worship leaders mistakenly seem to think that is their duty. On the contrary, in the Prayer Book we are led to confession by the Word of God breaking into our hearts, applied as balm to our weary souls by the Holy Spirit. Only the Word of God, not the clergy, can bring spiritual transformation. Only the Scriptures have the power to convict us of our sins and drive us to our knees. This foundational theological principle underpins the Book of Common Prayer.

With these opening prophetic and apostolic calls ringing in our ears, we are then exhorted to confession. But the ministerial tone is deliberately tender—‘dearly beloved brethren’—quoting the apostle Paul’s compassionate address to the New Testament church (Philippians 4:1).

Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us in sundry places to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness;

² For exposition of the Prayer Book’s teaching on private confession, see T. W. Drury, *Confession and Absolution: The Teaching of the Church of England, as Interpreted and Illustrated by the Writings of the Reformers of the Sixteenth Century* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903); John R. W. Stott, *Confess Your Sins: The Way of Reconciliation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964); Andrew Atherstone, *‘I Absolve You’: Private Confession and the Church of England* (London: Latimer Trust, 2005).

and that we should not dissemble nor cloke them before the face of Almighty God our heavenly Father; but confess them with an humble, lowly, penitent, and obedient heart; to the end that we may obtain forgiveness of the same, by his infinite goodness and mercy. And although we ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before God, yet ought we most chiefly so to do when we assemble and meet together . . .

We are invited to approach ‘with a pure heart and humble voice unto the throne of the heavenly grace’. As Thomas Bisse put it in his sermons, *The Beauty of Holiness in the Common Prayer* (1716), this ‘judicious’ exhortation is designed ‘to instruct the ignorant, to admonish the negligent, to support the fearful, to comfort the doubtful, to caution the formal, and to check the presumptuous; seeing all these tempers are found in every mixed Congregation, and ought to be prepared for this solemn work.’³ Here we also see Cranmer’s desire to undercut the widespread medieval practice of ‘auricular’ confession, by moving confession out of the priest’s booth and into the worshipping life of the whole congregation.

Three important themes are highlighted. First, as already noted, it is Scripture that does the spiritual work, that ‘moveth us’. Second, the right attitude of confession is explained—humble, penitent, obedient, honest. When faced by the shame of our sins we must neither ‘dissemble nor cloke’ them, disguising or hiding their true nature. ‘Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy’ (Proverbs 28:13). Third, God’s character is described—he is Almighty and seated on a royal throne, but also a heavenly Father, of infinite goodness and mercy, gracious and ready to forgive. There is wonderful scriptural fullness here. We hear not just of the Lord’s awesome holiness and judgment, but also his loving-kindness. He is slow to anger and abounding in love. Those who caricature the Book of Common Prayer’s portrayal of God as severe and distant are badly mistaken. On the contrary, these liturgies abound with the language of compassion, love and grace.

Common Worship and *New Patterns for Worship* offer numerous alternative invitations to confession, which are worth comparing with these three motifs in the Prayer Book. A familiar example runs: ‘Jesus says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.” So let us turn away from our sin and turn to Christ, confessing our sins in penitence and faith.’ This scores two out of three. It includes a call from Scripture (Matthew 4:17) and tells us the right attitude for confession (‘penitence and faith’), but it says nothing about the character of God, either his holiness or

3 Thomas Bisse, *The Beauty of Holiness in the Common Prayer, as Set Forth in Four Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (London, 1716), p. 25.

compassion. Another example is: 'Brothers and sisters, as we prepare to celebrate, let us call to mind our sins.' That invitation says almost nothing, a score of zero. A better modern example is: 'The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart God will not despise. Let us come to the Lord, who is full of compassion, and acknowledge our transgressions in penitence and faith.' This scores full marks, three out of three. It includes a call from Scripture (Psalm 51:17), and instructs us about our attitude ('penitence and faith') and God's character ('full of compassion').

The invitation to confession is not a trivial rubric to be set aside or passed over lightly. It is a major opportunity, in a succinct way, to fix the gospel in our minds as we come to the Lord. The architects of the Book of Common Prayer pondered these questions deeply and established an excellent model by which all other Anglican liturgies should be measured.

2) Confession

The Prayer Book confessions have also been carefully crafted. In Morning and Evening Prayer, the confession has a hinge halfway through:

Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.
We have followed too much
The devices and desires of our own hearts.
We have offended against thy holy laws.
We have left undone those things which we ought to have done,
and we have done those things which we ought not to have done,
and there is no health in us.

Then comes the hinge of the prayer. When God steps into the picture, everything changes, a reiterated theme of the Scriptures. In Ephesians 2, for example, the apostle proclaims that we were dead in sins, enslaved to the devil, and living according to the flesh. 'But God' (v.4) rescued us in his mercy. Again, we were separated from Christ, alienated from God's people, strangers to the covenant promises. 'But now in Christ Jesus' (v.13), we have been redeemed. This gospel pattern of 'Great Reversal' is reflected in the structure of the Prayer Book confession. It breaks into the description of our sins with the triumphant words, 'But thou, O Lord ...':

But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.
Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults.
Restore thou them that are penitent,
according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord.
And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake,

that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life,
to the glory of thy holy name.

The Prayer Book confession at Holy Communion contains similar themes:

Almighty God,
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
maker of all things, judge of all men:
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.
Have mercy upon us,
have mercy upon us, most merciful Father,
for thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake,
forgive us all that is past,
and grant that we may ever hereafter
serve and please thee in newness of life,
to the honour and glory of thy name,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Taken together, these two confessions illustrate some central theological themes concerning our sin and God's grace. The nature of sin is summarized with many different biblical metaphors. Sin means breaking God's laws, straying from God's ways, following our own 'devices and desires' (an evocative phrase, concerning human pleasure and cunning, borrowed by P. D. James for the title of one of her murder mysteries). We commit sins of commission and omission. We are guilty in our thinking, our speaking, and our actions – a trio lifted from the Sarum rite: *'peccavi nimis cogitatione, locutione, et opere'* ('I have sinned grievously by thought, word, and deed').⁴ Our sins are 'intolerable'—that is, too heavy to bear. We cannot carry them and collapse under their weight. There is no 'health' in us—that is, no salvation. Only God can save.

These confessions take the form of a lament. We 'bewail' our sins, even the memory of which is painful. We approach God in sorrow and

⁴ William Maskell, *The Ancient Liturgy of the Church of England According to the Uses of Sarum, Bangor, York, and Hereford, and the Modern Roman Liturgy, Arranged in Parallel Columns* (second edition, London: William Pickering, 1846), p. 10.

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penitence. We are ‘miserable’—not sad, but wretched, in distress and to be pitied. This is resonant language, familiar also from the Prayer Book Litany:

O God the Father of heaven:
have mercy upon us miserable sinners.

O God the Son, Redeemer of the world:
have mercy upon us miserable sinners.

O God the Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son:
have mercy upon us miserable sinners.

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 ours 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.

Although the Prayer Book’s description of sin is multifaceted, there are nevertheless three striking omissions. First, the confessions do not explicitly mention the corruption of our human nature, a conspicuous absence when compared with other Reformation liturgies. Archbishop Hermann van Wied’s 1545 order for the church in Cologne—translated into English as *A Simple and Religious Consultation* (1547)—was a rich fund of ideas for Cranmer. Its model confession at Holy Communion began as follows:

Almighty, everlasting God,
the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the maker of all things, the judge of all men,
we acknowledge and we lament
that we were conceived and born in sins,
and that therefore we be prone to all evils,
and abhor from all good things ...⁵

5 ‘Church Order for Cologne, 1545’, in G. J. Cuming, *A History of Anglican Liturgy* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 342.

Cranmer plagiarised these opening phrases for the Book of Common Prayer, but deliberately dropped the reference to being conceived and born in sin. Although the Anglican Reformers did teach the doctrine of original sin (see Article 9 of the Thirty-Nine Articles), our confessions do not highlight it. The phrase ‘there is no health in us’, may allude to the corruption of human nature, but is no more than a hint. Perhaps this lack is because Cranmer did not want to give the impression that we might have an excuse for our wrongdoing, that ‘we’re born into a fallen world, it’s not our fault; blame Adam and Eve, don’t blame us.’ The focus instead is upon taking personal responsibility for our sins and confessing them.

Second, the Prayer Book confessions do not mention any specific examples of sin. That is quite deliberate. As the rubric notes, it is a ‘general confession’ which can be prayed by the whole congregation, suitable for all Christians in all circumstances. A ‘particular confession’, by contrast, is prayed in private, naming our specific offences before God in detail. It is obviously inappropriate to write particular confessions into corporate liturgies.

Third, the Prayer Book omits any concept of societal, institutional, or structural sin. That does not mean the confessions are individualistic—they adopt corporate language (‘we acknowledge . . . we repent . . . forgive us’). But, again, the emphasis is upon taking personal responsibility. Structures and institutions cannot in themselves sin—the problem is the human beings who live within those structures and institutions. We are the ones who sin, and need to put things right with God and with our neighbours.

Concerning the character of God, the confessions again borrow from a wide range of biblical imagery. He is our creator, a just judge, a holy king, the lawgiver, a God of wrath, but also, wonderfully, a merciful Father. Thomas Comber (Dean of Durham) commented in his devotional guide, *A Companion to the Temple* (1684), on the significance of the opening phrase—‘Almighty and most merciful Father’—where two divine titles are combined together:

If Fear will move our hearts, here is represented his terrible Power; if Love will work upon us, here is discovered his unspeakable Goodness; and what heart can resist both? His Almightyness is first; but if the terror thereof seal up thy lips, let the hope of his Fatherly pity and compassion open them again.⁶

Rather than leaving us fearful and trembling, the confessions speak repeatedly of mercy. God as Father appears not once, but twice, in both

6 Thomas Comber, *A Companion to the Temple: or, A Help to Devotion in the Use of the Common Prayer* (4 parts, London, 1684), part 1, p. 27.

prayers. They ring out with confidence in Jesus the Saviour. We rely on the promises of God declared in Jesus. We petition for forgiveness and restoration from God for the sake of Jesus. These confessions are thoroughly Christological, addressed to our compassionate Father but in the name of Jesus. We seek not only mercy for past sins, but future grace to live holy lives. Henceforth we desire to be ‘godly, righteous, and sober’ (a triad borrowed from Titus 2:12). We want to please God through how we live, and to serve him wholeheartedly. God’s glory is our ultimate aim—both confessions end in the same way: ‘to the honour and glory of thy name’.

The Prayer Book confessions take a deep dive into scriptural theology. They are realistic, but also hopeful, combining lament with celebration. Significantly, they are written in the language of the heart—not a barren contractual exchange, but a deeply emotional appeal, trusting in the grace and mercy of God. These confessions are a golden liturgical standard, next to which our modern Anglican confessions should be compared and held to account.

3) Absolution

At Morning and Evening Prayer, the absolution is *declaratory*—the minister *declares* that God will absolve those who repent and believe in Jesus Christ. At Holy Communion, the absolution is *precatory*—the minister *prays* that God will absolve those who repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Both forms are important.

a) Declaratory

The declaratory form was unknown in the medieval church and was first developed by the Reformers. It opens with words borrowed directly from the prophet Ezekiel. God’s people were weighed down by their transgressions, but Ezekiel was commanded to proclaim a grace-filled message from the Lord himself: ‘Say to them: “As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?”’ (Ezekiel 33:11). This scriptural call to repentance, and promise of the remission of sins, was embedded in the Anglican liturgy. Modelling on Ezekiel is an indication that Cranmer understood the Prayer Book’s declaration of forgiveness to be a prophetic and proclamatory ministry, not a priestly one. It is not the minister who pardons or absolves—that is God’s work, as the liturgy makes clear:

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who desireth not the death of a sinner,

but rather that he may turn from his wickedness, and live,
and hath given power, and commandment, to his ministers,
to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent,
the absolution and remission of their sins:
He pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent,
and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel.
Wherefore let us beseech him to grant us true repentance,
and his Holy Spirit,
that those things may please him, which we do at this present,
and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure, and holy,
so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

This declaration celebrates the grace and mercy of God. Pardon does not rely upon our merit; it is freely available to all those who ‘repent and believe’. Indeed, the declaration quotes the words of Jesus, who proclaimed: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe in the gospel’ (Mark 1:15). The Prayer Book borrows this last phrase, only emphasising that our repentance and faith must be genuine—‘true’ and ‘unfeigned’. It also highlights the vital role of the Holy Spirit, who convicts our consciences of sin (John 16:8) and drives us to Jesus Christ. Without the Holy Spirit there can never be true repentance or a subsequent life of holiness. Repentance goes against all our natural instincts and does not spring from ourselves, as if it were some sort of human virtue which impresses God and persuades him to forgive. True repentance is itself a gift from God (Acts 11:18, 2 Timothy 2:25), an act of divine grace, as the Prayer Book absolution highlights.

This declaratory absolution is designed as a mini-sermon, summarizing the gospel message. It is not like a judge’s sentence in a court room, declaring us pardoned, but is a prophetic exhortation laying out the conditions on which God promises to pardon. If the declaration itself conveyed pardon, it would not exhort us in the very next line to pray for true repentance. Furthermore, immediately after the absolution comes the Lord’s Prayer, including the petition ‘forgive us our trespasses’. This would make little sense if our trespasses had been forgiven a few seconds earlier. Several Prayer Book collects likewise pray for pardon and absolution:

Grant, we beseech thee, merciful Lord, to thy faithful people pardon and peace; that they may be cleansed from all their sins, and serve thee with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. (*Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity*)

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O Lord, we beseech thee, absolve thy people from their offences; that through thy bountiful goodness we may all be delivered from the bands of those sins, which by our frailty we have committed: Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake, our blessed Lord and Saviour. (*Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Trinity*)

Every day in Lent, the 'collect for the day' is followed by the collect for Ash Wednesday, which expounds similar themes:

Almighty and everlasting God, who hast nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the Prayer Book liturgy, these collects are said even when absolution and remission has already been declared, which again highlights the conditional nature of that declaration.

There has long been theological dispute in the Church of England over who may say the absolution. According to Cranmer's original rubric, it was to be 'pronounced by the minister', but in the 1662 Prayer Book this was changed to 'pronounced by the priest'. The bishops at the 1661 Savoy Conference reasoned:

since some parts of the Liturgy may be performed by a Deacon, others by none under the Order of a Priest, viz. Absolution, Consecration, it is fit that some such word as Priest should be used for those Offices, and not Minister, which signifies at large every one that ministers in the holy Office, of what Order soever he be.⁷

Nevertheless, in other places the Prayer Book continues to use 'priest' and 'minister' in a random and interchangeable manner, and many of the rubrics which say 'priest' are regularly fulfilled by deacons and lay ministers. Significantly, when enshrined in law, the 1662 Act of Uniformity reserved consecration at Holy Communion to priests, but not absolution. Although the Savoy bishops altered the rubric, they did not touch the liturgy itself, which still says that God 'hath given power, and commandment, to his ministers'.

This unresolved question reflects rival Anglican understandings of the nature of ordained ministry. The debate was renewed, for example, in

⁷ Colin Buchanan (ed.), *The Savoy Conference Revisited: The Proceedings taken from the Grand Debate of 1661 and the Works of Richard Baxter* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002), p. 24.

the mid-twentieth century as lay ministries multiplied in the Church of England. The 1968 Prayer Book (Further Provisions) Measure gave formal permission to licensed Readers and other lay people to lead Morning and Evening Prayer, 'save for the absolution'.⁸ This was a source of contention at the Church Assembly, especially within the House of Laity. Some argued that since the laity are authorized to preach the gospel—and since the absolution takes the form of a miniature sermon—they should also be authorized to pronounce absolution. Proclaiming salvation through Christ, and declaring the remission of sins for all who repent, are both part of the prophetic office, they reasoned, so therefore belong together. Others lamented that although the new Measure professed to be enabling lay ministries, it was actually a backwards step which restricted them, because *de facto* many lay Readers in the 1960s already pronounced the absolution in their local parish churches.⁹ The Church Assembly agreed to insert a new rubric in the Prayer Book, that 'if no priest be present' the worship leader should read a collect in place of the usual absolution. An early contender was a collect from the Communion Service:

O Lord, we beseech thee, mercifully hear our prayers, and spare all those who confess their sins unto thee; that they, whose consciences by sin are accused, by thy merciful pardon may be absolved; through Christ our Lord.

In the event, the new rubric settled on the collect for the Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity. A motion resisting the proposed restriction was narrowly defeated in the House of Laity by 109 votes to 93.¹⁰ The situation is further confused by the fact that many parishes today, even in the 2020s, are still using Prayer Books purchased before 1968. Those using the newer printing should be aware that this rubric is not part of the original 1662 text but a modern interpolation.

The Prayer Book model of declaratory absolution is an excellent, theologically rich, pastorally wise, form of words. Unfortunately, in our modern liturgies it has now ended up in a liturgical cul-de-sac. Of the fifteen authorized absolutions in *Common Worship*, none of them is declaratory, so that even at Morning and Evening Prayer it has now become standard for ministers to use a precatory form instead. That is a great shame. *Common Worship* is often trumpeted as providing greater liturgical variety than the Book of Common Prayer—there is now a choice of fifteen absolutions, not just two—but in fact *Common Worship* has restricted our options severely,

8 Canon B11 (Morning and Evening Prayer), Canon D1 (Deaconesses) and Canon E4 (Readers), all promulgated in the 1960s, adopted the same phrase, 'save for the absolution'.

9 Church Assembly: Report of Proceedings vol. 46 (Spring 1966), pp. 176-84; vol. 46 (Summer 1966), pp. 468-81; vol. 47 (Summer 1967), pp. 564-7.

10 Church Assembly: Report of Proceedings vol. 46 (Summer 1966), p. 480.

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by cutting off one half of the Prayer Book models. We have lost something very important by removing declaratory absolution from the church's worshipping life, and need to begin a contemporary re-engagement with this classic, but forgotten, Anglican form.

b) Precatory

For the precatory form of absolution at Holy Communion, the Prayer Book borrows from the medieval liturgies, but with some very significant additions.¹¹ The Latin rites of Sarum, Bangor, and York, used a form of words which stretched back to earlier centuries:

Misereatur vestri omnipotens Deus,
et dimittat vobis omnia peccata vestra,
liberet vos ab omni malo,
conservet et confirmet in omni opere bono,
et perducatur vos ad vitam æternam.¹²

This might be rendered into English:

Almighty God,
have mercy upon you,
deliver you from all your sins,
free you from all evil,
strengthen and confirm you in all goodness,
and bring you to everlasting life.

That is a good prayer, so far as it goes. There is much here, suggested Dean Comber, to cheer the hearts of the contrite:

for behold it contains all that you do need or can desire. Are you miserable? here is *mercy*. Are you sinful? here is *pardon*. Are you liable to punishment? here is *deliverance*. Are you desirous, but unable to do good? here is *strength and confirmation*. Are you fearful of Death and Hell? here is *Heaven and Everlasting Life*.¹³

Archbishop Cranmer conscripted this ancient prayer for his English rite. He seldom began with a blank sheet of paper, but set out to improve upon the received tradition. In his revised absolution, he dropped the Catholic emphasis on bondage to the power of evil, perhaps for the same reason that he dropped (from the confession) the Reformed emphasis

11 See further, Andrew Atherstone, 'The Lord's Supper and the Gospel of Salvation: Grace Alone and Faith Alone in the Book of Common Prayer', in Lee Gatiss (ed.), *Feed My Sheep: The Anglican Ministry of Word and Sacrament* (London: Lost Coin 2016), pp. 71-99.

12 Maskell, *The Ancient Liturgy of the Church of England*, p. 12.

13 Comber, *A Companion to the Temple*, part 3, p. 98.

on being born in sin – because it tended to shift the focus away from our personal responsibility. The Sarum absolution also did not say enough about God’s character, God’s promises, the ministry of Jesus, or the right response of the Christian believer, so Cranmer expanded it as follows:

Almighty God,
our heavenly Father,
who of his great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins
to all them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him;
Have mercy upon you,
pardon and deliver you from all your sins,
confirm and strengthen you in all goodness,
and bring you to everlasting life,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God is certainly omnipotent, but that is not the only truth the sinner needs to hear. With these wonderful liturgical flourishes, we are now reassured that God is also our heavenly Father, rich in mercy, and that when we turn back to him we receive forgiveness, made possible through our Lord Jesus Christ. This forgiveness is guaranteed by God’s promises, to all those whose faith is true (not a sham) and whose repentance is ‘hearty’, that is heartfelt (not for show).

But Cranmer did not stop there. How can we be assured of the forgiveness of our sins, if we repent and put our trust in Jesus Christ? Not because of what the minister proclaims to us in the liturgy, but because of what God himself promises to us in the Scriptures. Our reliance is not upon the words of the minister, but upon the Word of God. The Book of Common Prayer makes this clear by following the absolution immediately with the ‘words of comfort’, a wonderful catena of gospel promises. This innovation was again borrowed by Cranmer from Archbishop van Wied’s *Simple and Religious Consultation*.¹⁴ They are called ‘comfortable’ because they console the wounded conscience by reminding us of the Bible promises about the work of Jesus Christ on which our forgiveness is based. The Prayer Book words are taken from the 1540 Great Bible translation:

- Come unto me, all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you (Matthew 11:28)
- So God loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16)

14 ‘Church Order for Cologne, 1545’, p. 343.

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- This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15)
- If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:1-2).

These verses from the New Testament are integral to the Prayer Book absolution. It is as if the minister says, ‘Don’t take it from me, take it from Scripture—this is God’s promise to you.’

Unfortunately, *Common Worship* has now reversed Cranmer’s important revisions, and returned us to the medieval pattern of the Sarum rite. In *Common Worship*, the ‘comfortable words’ are entirely divorced from the absolution, and buried in a different part of the liturgy as an optional extra. And of the fifteen new absolutions authorized in *Common Worship*, only two of them speak of the need for true repentance and faith—in other words, 87% of the *Common Worship* absolutions do not mention the fact that penitent sinners must put our trust in Jesus Christ, a central Prayer Book emphasis.

Conclusion: The Golden Standard

The Book of Common Prayer remains the golden standard of Anglican liturgy—not because of the richness of its English cadences (though, no doubt, they are beautiful), but because of the richness of its biblical theology. Its pattern of prophetic invitation, heartfelt confession, and confident absolution is an excellent, succinct, expression of the New Testament gospel, full of spiritual nourishment and pastoral wisdom. It urges us to keep forsaking our sins and keep renewing our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, in delight and celebration at the remarkable grace and redemption which God freely offers to all those who repent and believe the gospel.

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‘Whose Property is Always to Have Mercy’: The Prayer Book Communion and the Nature of God

BRIDGET NICHOLS

Introduction

There are several possible ways of exploring the theme of MERCY in the Book of Common Prayer’s Order of Holy Communion, including comparison of texts, studies of translation from Latin to English, and efforts to enter the thought processes of the architects of various versions of the rite. These all have merits, and they have all informed what I want to say today, but they are tools to be employed rather than a primary approach to the substance of the appeals for mercy and assurances of mercy that sound through the liturgy. My aim in this paper will be to suggest that we might work with the texture of words and ideas, and with the structure and action of the Order for Holy Communion, as these things are given to worshippers. Underneath this exploration runs the question of what they contribute towards some measure of understanding of the *character* of the God we worship.¹

To ask about character is to imply something about *relationship*. Elsewhere in this publication, Dr Andrew Atherstone discusses the Prayer Book’s formulae of confession. He opens up a discussion which at the same time gives the reader cause to wonder how it is that we dare to present ourselves before God at all, and shows the desire on God’s part to welcome, restore and forgive. The fact that we do return, again and again, suggests a conviction that God is merciful, generous, forgiving and welcoming, even if it is not a conviction that commands much conscious attention.

I will be referring to the 1662 Order of Holy Communion, which is itself a somewhat theoretical statement. Most of the people who encounter it do so in more or less modified forms, possibly mediated through the 1928 revision, though there are still thriving communities who maintain a strict fidelity to the full seventeenth-century order. The way we respond to its language and progress is affected more than we

¹ This subject is taken up in a profound and interesting way by Nicholas Wolterstorff in *The God We Worship: Explorations in Liturgical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2015).

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may be aware by the variable elements of the service: the collect, the readings, the addition of hymns, and the presence or absence of the *Gloria in Excelsis*, depending on the season. Our experience is further conditioned by setting. There is a great difference between a said celebration at 8 o’clock on a Sunday morning, with a small congregation present, and a mid-morning celebration with a larger congregation and full musical resources. It is, of course, an old truism that the Prayer Book Eucharist can be choreographed to look like Geneva at one extreme, and pontifical high mass at the other.

Whatever the style and context of our experience of participating in Holy Communion, individuals will have their own ways of prioritising what is most significant to them in their familiar forms of worship. There are nevertheless certain elements of the service that might particularly influence our understanding of mercy, and I will refer briefly to ten of them. Taking them in sequence order, we will consider the Collect for Purity, the recitation of the Ten Commandments, the Collect, the Offertory Sentences, the Prayer for the Church Militant, the Comfortable Words, the Prayer of Humble Access, the Prayer of Consecration, the prayers of self-oblation and thanksgiving which follow the administration of communion, and the *Gloria in Excelsis*. This may seem rather mechanical, but I hope to persuade you that something is unfolding as the celebration advances. At the time, it takes us forward stage by stage. Only later might we look back and realise what has accumulated through each phase, and what sort of imprint this may have left.

The Collect for Purity

Beside the Lord’s Prayer, this could well be the prayer that most Anglicans know by heart. I remember being taught it in Sunday School, yet it never loses its freshness, mystery and challenge. It places those who have gathered for the Eucharist immediately under the intense scrutiny of God—the God ‘unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid’. There are no hiding places here, but neither is the gaze of God one of accusation and judgement. The worshippers assemble before a presence who sees through all pretences. That in itself is an act of mercy—not having to be what we are not, not having to wonder how we will make particular requests, not having to be evasive about the subjects that are really buried in our hearts and minds, some that might bear close inspection, others that we would not admit to another human being. The relief of realising that God knows this already removes some of the obstacles we create for ourselves as the service begins. It is not a wiping of the slate, however: we move directly into the recitation of the Ten Commandments.

The Decalogue

Here I will start by making a comparison with the Order of Holy Communion in the 1549 Prayer Book, because a significant change takes place between the first attempt at a prayer book for the English Church and the second three years later. Where the *Kyrie eleison*—Lord, have mercy—followed the Collect for Purity in 1549, the Ten Commandments occupy that place from 1552 onwards. At first glance, this looks like a severe substitution, and we should not be blind to the determination to create a Church deeply rooted in Scripture and keenly aware of its obligation to the law of God.² But I suggest that there is another and more pastoral way to look at this. The sixteenth-century Reformers did not think that human beings had the resources to overcome their own failings. For this, they were entirely dependent on God. To pray that God would ‘have mercy on [them] and incline [their] hearts to keep this law’ after each commandment, and at the end, to ask God to inscribe the law on their hearts, is both the people’s acknowledgement of their need, and their expectation that it would indeed be answered with mercy. If you like, what we see here is a contract established between God and the assembly that sets the scene for everything that follows. It is also worth noting another and more subtle contract, or even a bond of affection, established between the heart of the believer and God. Anyone who is interested in the translations of the collects that appear in the BCP will be aware that the Latin *mens* (mind, intellect, reason) frequently becomes ‘heart’ in the hands of Cranmer and his revising colleagues.

The Collect

The Collect is the only variable element of the Prayer Book order of Holy Communion which we will look at today.³ That it changes from week to week in no way diminishes its power to speak to worshippers, and in fact our familiarity with the texts surrounding it may even enhance the novelty of something heard only once, or at any rate during one week, in an annual cycle. If you were to read through all the Collects for the Church’s Year in that section of your Prayer Books at a single sitting, you would be astonished at the number of times the words ‘mercy’, ‘merciful’ and ‘mercifully’ occur. The Collects for the Fifth Sunday in Lent and for Palm Sunday are excellent examples. Here is the Palm Sunday collect:

2 A very useful introduction can be found in David Wallingford, ed. Gordon P. Jeanes, *The Decalogue in the Reformation Liturgies* Alcuin GROW Joint Liturgical Study 82 (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2016).

3 Readings, music, sermons and intercessions, as well as choreography are also important variables and if this were a longer presentation there would be value in discussing their cognitive, affective and formational power.

‘Whose Property is Always to Have Mercy’

Almighty and everlasting God, who of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility; Mercifully grant that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.⁴

Here, mercy is given extra weight by being set in the context of other divine actions and characteristics. God’s ‘tender love’ for humanity lies at the root of the saving intervention which is the incarnation of Jesus Christ, whose own paradoxical ‘great humility’ shines from the cross and establishes an example for his followers. Their hope is not just to learn patience and humility, but through being patient and humble, to be ‘made partakers of [Christ’s] resurrection’. The prayer is largely faithful to the Palm Sunday collect in the Sarum Missal, with one strategic emendation: *mereamur* (that we might merit, or deserve, or be worthy of . . .) is not translated. I have tried to show this in a literal translation of the Latin text:

Omnipotens sempiterne Deus qui humano generi ad imitandum humilitatis exemplum salvatorem nostrum carnem sumere et crucem subire fecisti: concede propitius ut et patientiae ipsius habere documenta et resurrectionis consortia *mereamur*.⁵

Almighty and everlasting God, who caused our Saviour to take flesh and to undergo the cross in order that the human race might follow his example of humility: mercifully grant that we may be worthy both of this pattern of his suffering [endurance] and of a share in his resurrection.⁶

While the greatest number of the Collects in 1662 are traceable to decisions made by Archbishop Cranmer as work went on towards the 1549 Prayer Book, we should distinguish between original compositions and translations. It is possible that the Archbishop may have intended to produce a completely new set, replacing the collects of the Sarum Missal. Certainly, he began the annual cycle in this way with new Collects for Advent Sunday and the Second Sunday of Advent. Quite soon, however,

4 Brian Cummings *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 301-302.

5 Sarum collect for Palm Sunday in Martin Dudley *The Collect in Anglican Liturgy*, Alcuin Club Collection 72 (London: SPCK, 1994) 48.

6 My literal translation.

the strategy shifted more to translation.⁷ Here, a particular theological problem had to be overcome: many of the Latin models for what became English Collects spoke of human beings becoming worthy to receive the good things they hoped God would bestow on them.⁸ This was not a view to which the Reformers subscribed. Humanity could never be worthy of God's gifts and consequently depended wholly on God's grace. Yet it remained possible to speak of a merciful God who understood and empathised with unworthiness, and acted to help his creatures in their inability to help themselves. On the one hand, this may look pessimistic; on the other hand, it shapes habits of self-knowledge and trust. What we say about ourselves does not prejudice what we hope God will do for us. Perhaps the sense of the mercy of God is even enhanced by realising that 'we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves' (Lent 2).

Many of the Latin Collects used the word *misericordia*. Its range of reference is generous and encompasses mercy, pity and compassion. 'Mercy' emerges as the dominant choice for rendering this word in English, and perhaps that tells us something about the climate that the Prayer Book's compilers intended to foster in the Church. It carries the resonance of having been forgiven or treated generously, even when one did not deserve such treatment. 'Pity' does occur from time to time. 'Compassion' is a perfectly good word, but it has too many syllables for writing a well-balanced collect, and even at this early stage in the development of a liturgical vernacular for the English Church, enough sensitivity to rhythm and elegance had developed to avoid stylistic awkwardness on most occasions.

The Offertory Sentences

The survey leaps forward now to the offertory sentences that belong to the action following the sermon. You will be familiar with hearing one or two of these scriptural quotations read while the table is being prepared and the collection takes place. This is not simply cover for a spell of practical business. If you were to read the whole set of short biblical utterances from which the priest makes a choice, you would see that in various ways they all address the seriousness of responding to the generosity of God. God has given us so much. We return honour pre-eminently in worship, but there are other opportunities to show God's grace working in our lives. Almsgiving, generosity and support of the Church's ministry are among them. This sentence from the Letter

7 Geoffrey J. Cuming 'The Primers: Canticles and Collects' and 'Cranmer at Work' in *The Godly Order* Alcuin Club Collections 65 (London: SPCK, 1983) 26-55; 56-67.

8 Forms of the verb *mereri* 'to deserve or be worthy of', and the noun *meritum* 'merit' are consistently replaced with other expressions that avoid the idea of human worthiness based on conduct or character.

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to the Hebrews, which interestingly is not often read, perhaps because it comes some way down the list, is a fine illustration of the principle:

God is not unrighteous, that he will forget your works and labour that proceedeth of love; which love ye have shewed for his Names sake, who have ministered unto the saints, and yet do minister. (Heb. 6)

The sentences also put an interpretation on giving: it is never something we do for God; it is only ever a response to what God has done for us, and therefore an extension of God's own mercy in the world.

The Prayer for the Church Militant

Once the elements have been arranged and the people's offering has been presented, it is time for intercession. The prayer 'for the whole state of Christ's Church militant here in earth' begins by taking nothing for granted. The Church comes to God in prayer because the Apostle (St Paul) has taught that this is what it should do. The very first petition asks God 'mercifully [to accept our alms and oblations, and] to receive these our prayers'. There is an orderliness in its petitions: the universal Church, all Christian rulers, and those who govern under the sovereign and have responsibility for administering justice (remember that 'justice' is the counterpart of mercy). Then come Bishops and their clergy, and all God's people, with the special plea that their orientation towards God should be evident in the holiness and righteousness of their lives. The sick and needy follow, and finally those who have died. There is not a part of the structure of a Christian society that does not rely on divine mercy to keep it alive, keep it on the right path, and embrace it at the end of its mortal life.

You will notice that there are no prayers for individuals or communities outside this household of faith. Attitudes to intercession have changed a good deal, and though parts of the Christian world still hold firmly to the principle of election, there is much greater readiness to see the whole of humanity under the loving gaze of God. That gaze includes the created world, of which humanity is only one element. Before we judge our forebears, though, we should give some thought to the presentation of 'alms' as well as 'oblations'. The charitable work of a parish did not necessarily stop with those associated with the church, and good works were encouraged as signs of a fruitful life of faith.⁹

9 Homily 'A Sermon of Good Works Annexed unto Faith' [1547] Gerald Bray *The Book of Homilies: A Critical Edition* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2016). Signs of a faithful life are a very different matter from works righteousness. The homily sees the need to encourage the former while weaning the English Church away from the latter. See also Diarmaid MacCulloch *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996) p.375.

The Comfortable Words

It is unlikely in modern Prayer Book parishes that the president at the Eucharist will subject the congregation to one of the three set exhortations provided to be delivered after the sermon or homily, though there are always exceptions. For present purposes, I shall simply leave to your imaginations the prospect of being spoken to seriously about neglect in coming regularly to communion, or the importance of self-examination. Normally, the Confession and Absolution are the principal acts of examination, contrition and forgiveness. As Dr Atherstone has already opened them up in his article, I will do no more than mention an insight which emerged in a recent online dialogue on priestly spirituality between former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, and Bishop GERALYN WOLF, organised by the University of the South in Tennessee. Bishop Griswold touched on the significance of forgiveness: it is not given because God has changed his mind about us, but in order to change our minds about God.¹⁰

It is to the Comfortable Words which follow the Absolution that we turn now, and if you spent much of your childhood wondering what was ‘comfortable’ about these scriptural sentences, you have probably now discovered that in this instance, the word means ‘capable of bringing comfort’. There is a logic to this: the liturgical declaration of mercy in the assurance of forgiveness of sins is reinforced by further reminders of God’s mercy in the person and saving work of Jesus Christ. The Comfortable Words were not an original idea on Cranmer’s part: he borrowed them from the Consultation of Archbishop Hermann of Cologne, whose work was an important influence on the Book of Common Prayer in its first appearance.¹¹ There was a significant Cranmerian addition, however—the first sentence, from the eleventh chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew:

Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

There have been many attempts to reconstruct Cranmer’s thought processes, but it is probably not too dangerous a conjecture to suggest that this is what anyone feeling the burden of conscience might be most

10 University of the South ‘Thriving in Ministry’ Webinar series: Priestly Spirituality. 17 March 2021. <https://vimeo.com/525807763>.

11 Hermann von Wied (Archbishop of Cologne), Philip Melanchthon & Martin Luther *A simple, and religious consultation of vs Herman by the grace of God Archebishop of Colone, and prince Electour. [et] c. by what means a Christian reformation, and founded in Gods worde, of doctrine, administration of the deuine sacramentes, of ceremonies, and the hole cure of soules, and other ecclesiastical ministeries may be begon among men committed to our pastorall charge, vntil the Lorde graunt a better to be appoynted either by a free, and Christian cou[n]sayle, general, or national, or elles by the states of the empire of the natio[n] of Germanie, gathered together in the holye Gost* (London: John Daye, 1547).

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glad to hear.¹² Further assurances that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, and now pleads with the Father on their behalf, could only add consolation. I have never heard anyone abbreviate these sentences. They function as a whole statement of the saving purpose of God—almost a promise that no one is ever beyond the reach of mercy.

The Prayer of Humble Access and the constancy of God

We arrive now at the prayer which strongly divides Anglicans, the Prayer of Humble Access. Some find it an indispensable element of their eucharistic devotion and feel its absence keenly when it is omitted. Others regard it as a form of ecclesiastical grovelling which is inappropriate for people who have confessed their sins and received absolution. Might this polarisation itself have something to say about 'mercy'? How do we hear the guarantees and promises it contains, and where do the problems arise? It is always wise to attend to the text:

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may ever more dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

At the core of the prayer, linked by three variants of 'mercy', is a statement about the nature of God. First of all, it describes God's disposition, which is to be merciful in dealing with human beings. Secondly, it draws on the evidence of the mercies God has already shown through the course of history and continues to show in the lives of the faithful. Both of these things are caught up in the third, which makes mercy a defining 'property' of God. This is a stronger statement than the modernised version of the prayer offers us. 'Nature' does not do the whole work of 'property'. It does not quite manage to convey the idea of a unique quality, particular to God: God could not be God without consistently having mercy.

Devotees of the prayer value the opportunity to place themselves before God, not daring to make any personal claim of righteousness, but placing all their trust and confidence in what they know about God.

12 Bryan Spinks 'Treasures Old and New: a look at some of Thomas Cranmer's methods of liturgical compilation' in Paul Ayris & David Selwyn (eds) *Thomas Cranmer: Churchman and Scholar* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1993) 175-188; Geoffrey J. Cuming 'Cranmer at Work' in *The Godly Order Alcuin Club Collections* 65 (London: SPCK, 1983) 56-67.

They find in the graphic richness of its imagery a way to dramatise their own unworthiness (they hardly dare to look for crumbs), and a way to imagine the great purification that comes about when Jesus Christ enters the whole human being. The biblical resonances are powerful—the Syro-Phoenician woman who does eventually obtain healing for her child but not without a struggle with Jesus, the language of feeding on the body of Christ in John 6, and the vision of Revelation, showing those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb.

Others are repelled by the same qualities that appeal to this first category. They resent being coerced into describing their own unworthiness when they have just received absolution, and in the larger frame, when they are asked to believe that Christ died to save them from their sins.¹³ They might even object to the way the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman is used. All of this eclipses any sense of the great gift of mercy which is there to be claimed and relied on. It is not clear that there is a way to reconcile these opposing perspectives, but if the position of the prayer is one major cause of difficulty, then it could credibly stand as a prayer for personal use before the service of Holy Communion begins. Different parts of the Anglican Communion have experimented with its position in the service in ways which bear attention.

The Prayer of Consecration

The theme of mercy is nevertheless picked up immediately after the Prayer of Humble Access in the opening words of the Prayer of Consecration, 'Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only begotten Son Jesus Christ . . .'. If you have not read Bishop Colin Buchanan's Grove Booklet, arrestingly entitled, *What Did Cranmer Think He Was Doing?*, you will find a very trenchant argument for the dramatic logic that has brought us from the *Sursum Corda*, through the Prayer of Humble Access, to this point.¹⁴ Buchanan draws a contrast between the emphasis on consecration in 1549, and the new emphasis on reception in 1552. Whether the 1552 rearrangement of the 1549 Order of Holy Communion into what is almost exactly the shape that survives in 1662 was as self-consciously and dramatically strategic as Buchanan suggests is beyond verification. Nevertheless, it does give us a rationale for considering how we might plunge devotionally from the ecstatic song of the cherubim in the *Sanctus*, into sharp awareness of our own

13 David Jasper discusses the crude rationalism of assuming that the body of Christ deals with the human body's need for cleansing, while Christ's blood deals with the spiritual cleansing of the soul. The Alternative Service Book 1980 attempted to circumvent this by sanitising the prayer and omitting the robust imagery altogether. David Jasper 'Heaven in Ordinary, Man Well Dressed'. *Poetry and the Language of Prayer and Worship* Ignaziana 2017. 52-62. 56-57.

14 Colin Buchanan *What Did Cranmer Think He Was Doing?* 2nd edn (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1982).

unworthiness. At the end of the Prayer of Humble Access, worshippers are able to seek the unimaginable mercy that answers unworthiness in the mystery of salvation. If the emphasis is on reception, then this projects the gaze firmly forward to the Words of Institution which lead into the administration of communion.

The Prayers of Self-Oblation and Thanksgiving

The two prayers that follow the distribution of communion give an option: either to speak of what has just occurred as a sacrifice of praise, offered by people who ultimately present themselves as living sacrifice; or to thank God for feeding the people with the spiritual food of Christ's body. The first prayer migrated out of the 1549 prayer of consecration in the revision of 1552 in the face of anxieties about its sacrificial metaphors. While the second option is preferred by those who are suspicious of the use of sacrificial language, and mistrust any suggestion that human beings might offer God anything at all, the alternative contains words that perfectly capture the way we might want a merciful God to regard us and judge—'not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offences'.¹⁵

The Gloria

Finally, a few remarks on the Gloria. The ancient song of the Church is inspired by the song of the angels in the Lukan nativity story, and by the scene of worship described in Revelation 5.6-14. The Gloria begins by acclaiming God the Father. At its centre is a sustained cry for mercy, addressed to the glorified Christ, the Lamb of God, the one who takes away the sins of the world. It finishes with an acclamation that recognises the divinity of Christ, which gives a clue to its possible origin in a place where the Arian heresy had to be opposed. The Gloria puts the living face of God, who shares our life in Christ, on divine mercy, and stakes its claim each time it is recited on the fact that Christ's sacrifice continue to be effective—the present tense is significant.

Conclusion

This brief overview has been a tour of some notable landmarks rather than a continuous journey. At the same time, I hope that I have avoided giving the impression that the linear progression of the rite is a magic formula that will lead the faithful to a deep experience of God's mercy if it is followed properly. Apart from the fact that liturgy does not work like that, the experience itself is not the question which underpins all that we have discussed. Our interest is in the character of God, and what the Prayer Book Order of Communion permits us to say about that

¹⁵ I have not been able to verify the possibility that sources for this phrase might be traceable to Jewish prayers, but see Daniel 9.18.

character. The picture that emerges is a complex one, because it does not allow mercy to be isolated from self-examination, or from obedience, or from duty to society, or from continual reflection on the privilege of the sacraments. The purple passages I have mentioned are all part of the dialogue that goes on between worshippers and the God they worship each time they gather to celebrate the Eucharist. It is a dialogue that could not even begin unless we believed we were approaching a merciful God. Yet in each celebration, if we are attentive, we will hear what we think we know already as we have never heard it before.

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‘Whose Sins Thou Dost Forgive, They are Forgiven’: The Remedy for Sin

MARTIN WARNER

How do those who declare, ‘There is no health in us,’ find the remedy for their unhealthy lives in the Church’s ministry of forgiveness? In an attempt to answer this question, we shall consider Cranmer’s provision for the liturgical exercise of absolution and remission of sins in daily prayer, and the authorisation of ordained ministers for this work. We shall also look at how the exercise of that ministry reveals what it means to be a Christian in our own time.

Starting the day with God’s mercy

Some of you may be familiar with John Betjeman’s 1974 television programme, *A Passion for Churches*, filmed in the diocese of Norwich.

He observes the incumbent of Florden walk up the path into his tiny medieval church, to toll the bell and begin just another day with Morning Prayer, said aloud with no other mortal person present.

Betjeman understood, perhaps better than we do today, that this is the outworking of the life of prayer that belongs to ordination. ‘It does not matter when they do not come. It doesn’t matter there’s no one there. The villagers know the priest is praying for them in their church.’

I find this honesty refreshing, in contrast to the numbers-driven obsession in many parts of the Church of England of our own day. Betjeman’s observation suggests to me a working of the mercy of God that somehow confounds our need to regulate and document God’s love. Worship as the work of the Holy Spirit invites us to see that the mercy of God works more simply, more generously, more persistently.

I am intrigued by the Prayer Book details for this daily routine, and the clarity of instruction for its observance. This instruction is to be found in the rubrics. These are printed in red (hence the name) or in italics. They are more than a commentary. They belong to the authorised text and in some cases, such as the giving of communion, they have implications for Church law.

The instructions (rubrics) might mean more than you think

After the general confession, the 1662 Prayer Book rubric states: ‘The Absolution or Remission of sins is to be pronounced by the Priest alone, standing: the people still kneeling.’

This rubric represents the outcome of a process of clarification in the Church of England's liturgical and theological life. In Cranmer's Prayer Book of 1549, Morning Prayer began with the Lord's Prayer (still referred to as *Pater noster*), going straight into 'O Lord, open thou our lips'.

The scripture sentences and penitential introduction are an innovation in the 1552 version, in which the rubrics specify that if the minister be a bishop he shall wear a rochet, and if a priest or deacon he shall wear a surplice 'onely'. But the rubric for saying the absolution is simply that it is 'to be pronounced by the minister alone'. At this stage it is clear that the words are to be pronounced by someone who has been ordained.

Nothing much changes in the 1559 Elizabethan provision for the daily office. But interest in the significance of Cranmer's rubric emerged at the Hampton Court Conference of 1604, convened by James I. Here the term 'absolution' was challenged by the Puritan faction who wanted it to be replaced by the term 'remission of sins'. They asserted that absolution implied forgiveness of sins that was proper only for God: remission was something permitted to mortals, and therefore, the Puritans concluded, 'you are in this point too much the apes of Popery.'

Bishop Launcelot Andrews provided scriptural references for the giving of absolution as characteristic of the Church of England's understanding that in context of liturgical prayer the ordained person does indeed minister the things of God and absolution, an expression of God's mercy, is one of those ministries entrusted to mortals through the grace of ordination.

There was further clarification of Cranmer's rubric in the Savoy Conference of 1661, following the restoration of Charles II. John Cosin, Bishop of Durham, headed a revision committee that amended the rubric. As it now stands in the 1662 Prayer Book, the rubric specifically uses the term Priest, rather than Minister. The emergence of colloquial reference to ministers as those who represented 'dissenting' or Puritan congregations prompted the need to clarify who the officiating minister is in this context. In the Church of England it is someone ordained in the three-fold order of the Church Catholic.

The Conference resisted the use of the term 'minister' or 'curate' which could refer to what we would think of as a licensed incumbent or assistant curate: it is specifically a priest and not a deacon. (A bishop is also understood as being a priest in this instance; still in many places it is thought that the absolution should be spoken by a bishop, if present.)

The rubric was extended to require the priest not only to pronounce the Absolution alone (the people do not join in) but also to stand up to do this, while the people remain kneeling. Cosin had already observed that the prayer of confession was to be said by all, while kneeling,

because ‘kneeling is the most fit gesture for humble penitents’. The requirement for the priest to stand to pronounce the Absolution was also the extension of an assertion made earlier in that century by Launcelot Andrews: ‘because [the priest] speaks it *authoritativé* in the name of Christ and His Church, the Minister must not kneel, but stand up’.

‘He maketh...his ministers a flaming fire’ (Ps 104.4)

I have spoken about this rubric as indicating the need to clarify a strong sense in the Church of England’s self-understanding of the intimate connection between the exercise of ministerial priesthood and the recitation of the daily office.

This work of prayer is an expression of Christ’s priesthood mediated through the Church’s life in the offering of all prayer to the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. The penitential introduction to the daily office is an indication of how prayer draws heaven and earth back into a relationship that speaks of harmony and the overwhelming of sin by God’s mercy and grace.

The rhythm of prayer outlined by the Prayer Book is itself part of the remedy for sin. The priest ministers as one to whom the Church entrusts personal and corporate liturgical articulation (which is more than aspiration: it is the statement in time of eternal reality) of this work of reconciliation that embraces every aspect of creation.

In this season of Lent I have been meditating on that work of reconciliation in the use of the *Benedicite, omnia opera* in the Prayer Book rite of Morning Prayer. This canticle of praise, truly an environmentalist’s hymn, unites creation in an act of praise which is itself salvific in its origins. The point is that Ananias, Azarias and Misael walk in the heart of the fire with a person understood in the Christian tradition to pre-figure Jesus Christ, who is present as their saviour. The furnace is no longer a force of destruction, but an image of the very life of God.

The thirteenth-century Franciscan, St Bonaventure, following the thought of the Letter to the Hebrews, describes this as ‘the fire that totally enflames and carries us into God by ecstatic unctious and burning affections. This fire is God and his furnace is in Jerusalem.’

But more than that, this is also about the daily working of creation and the earth as the theatre of revelation. The rising of the sun in the sky is a daily enactment of the rising of the Son of Man from the dead. He warms us and gives us light: and this fire speaks of a furnace in which all sin and evil are purged and we are refined, like gold.

The daily offering of this work of prayer, attended by the rising and setting of the sun, is not the only means by which the remedy of God’s mercy is made available. The contested language of absolution, priesthood and authority in this little rubric is an indication that the Church of England has often struggled to sustain its identity as both Catholic and

reformed. But attention to the priestly ministry of absolution takes us deeper into the nature of the Church as it undertakes the saving work that Jesus Christ has entrusted to us.

The impact of the Prayer Book on a child's imagination

As a small boy, intrigued and dazzled by the experience of singing in the choir of Rochester Cathedral, the Prayer Book made a deep impression on me. Part of this was cultural, in the heady mix of language and music spanning five centuries of English and European culture, and part of it was also theological. The nature of the Church was articulated by what I saw and heard happening around me.

For a short while there was a theological college in Rochester, and we got to know the ordinands and saw them being ordained (in a service which took a very long time). John Lennon slept outside the cathedral one Christmas and the bishop preached a sermon about the transience of fashion.

Older choristers were confirmed and then when they returned from communion their breath was heavy with the scent of wine. As we went to our early morning choir practices, people would emerge from one of the shadowy side chapels where Holy Communion had been said (without the choir—how strange!). And then very occasionally after Evensong one of the Canons would disappear into a transept where no one normally went and sit to listen to someone else kneeling down to pray very quietly, which all seemed rather grave and special.

A very fervent master in our choir school used to hold forth about the dangers of all this stuff in church because it distracted us from our sins and from repentance and from being saved. I thought this was odd and shared my concerns with the most terrifying of the canons who, I felt sure, would know the truth. He'd been a school chaplain and proved to be immensely kind.

'Come with me, Warner,' he said and went up to the bishop's throne where there was a very splendid edition of the Prayer Book, which he took down and read to me, quoting from *The Form and Manner of Ordering of Priests*. 'Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained.' He told me that these were words Jesus had spoken to his disciples after his resurrection; it was for this that he gave the Holy Spirit so that the work of forgiveness could continue through the Church.

Now, when I hear those words and look back along the range of contexts in which they are invoked through the working of the Holy Spirit, I see that the remedy of the mercy of God works in many different ways, but always with formative power that continues to shape the life of Jesus Christ in the members of his body on earth, the Church.

How this helps us to be a Christian today

I wish to conclude by giving two examples of how the detailing of the rubric in Morning Prayer might illuminate the working of God's mercy.

The first is in the intimacy of the confessional, which is a provision in the Prayer Book Visitation of the Sick.

Confession in the Church of England

Simon Patrick a bishop of Chichester and then of Ely, wrote this in 1692 to his clergy about this exercise of the priestly office: 'Absolution of penitents is a thing of great moment; which may alone be sufficient to convince you both of the dignity and the difficulty of your holy function. For what a high honour is it to be made a judge of the state of men's immortal souls.'

Just for the record, touching on the final point that Bishop Patrick made, it has always seemed to me that a priest who exercises this ministry is made competent to do so by the experience of being a penitent, kneeling as the recipient of the mercy of God's forgiveness that every priest is also called to administer.

But the important point here is that the mercy of God in the work of absolution must work at the level of the intimate and of personal conviction. This absolutely is about the knowledge of Jesus Christ as one who saves you.

This instinct that has expression in the pastoral office of the Prayer Book is also heard in the writing of Pope Francis: 'I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ . . . Let me say this once more: God never tires of forgiving us: we are the ones who tire of seeking for his mercy.' How well this resonates with other words more familiar to us: 'Ye that do truly and earnestly repent . . . draw near with faith and take this holy sacrament to your comfort.'

This personal and individual dimension of the dispensation of mercy reminds us very powerfully that no human being is ever a statistic, a number, or a category. Each is a beloved child.

When Christians worship, you see the Church

The second point I wish to make is about the nature of worship and therefore it is also about the nature of the Church.

Bishop John Cosin was surely right to make what we would now understand as a psychological observation about posture in worship. The act of kneeling is a gesture that gives public and personal expression to certain aspirations of the mind and heart.

(May I also make clear that this is a matter of capacity as much as a matter of principle: there will be many who for very different reasons

cannot kneel in the physicality of their body, but who can do so in the intention of their minds.)

A consequence of the rubric, 'all kneeling' is that it literally levels a congregation and eradicates social distinction. By this dramatic action the congregation indicates its living participation in the liturgy. It is a way of asserting that we are never merely individual persons in the Church: we are always part of that mystical body whose vocation is to enfold the whole human race.

In wider society today, and in the Church of England, we hear a great deal about the dangers of deference. They are real and should be stated. But there is an equal danger. It is that a society, especially a sacred society such as the Church, has no knowledge of the virtue of deference, honour, reverence, and self-restraint and how it should be exercised with joy and dignity. This, surely, must be what we mean when in the prayer of Confirmation it is said, in the words of the Prayer Book, 'Fill them, O Lord, with the spirit of thy holy fear'.

This fear is, rightly, what inspires us to examine our conscience and recognise our sin before God. The loss of our willingness to kneel indicates to me a strain of pride in our culture today, and it infects our liturgical and spiritual lives. I believe it makes us lazy in the participation of the worship of God, and in seeking to sit rather than kneel, we can slip into the expectation that Church worship is a spectator occupation, in which some external operation will engage or even entertain us.

Posture is a powerful element in our psychological makeup. It can indeed induce a sense of submission and contrition for our sins. But it can also prompt us to honour the creation as the handiwork of God, it can fill our minds with wonder and delight, it can lead us into silent adoration and the contemplation of the glory of God that is not yet, but will be, fully visible to us:

Father of Jesus, love's reward, what rapture will it be
Prostrate before thy throne to lie, and gaze and gaze on thee.

The remedy of sin, in the processes of repentance, confession and absolution, and the amendment of life, are all features of the routine of Christian living provided by the Prayer Book. And they lead in a particular direction, lifting our gaze to heaven. Over the course of centuries, the rites of the Prayer Book have prompted the imagination of the Church of England to deploy art, music, colour and movement in shaping an environment of worship that can indeed bring us to our knees in penitence and adoration.

This aspiration is given extravagant expression in St Paul's Cathedral, the Church of England's first cathedral built after a century of reform.

'Whose Sins Thou Dost Forgive, They are Forgiven': The Remedy for Sin

It is also evident in the ancient churches that Betjeman visited in the diocese of Norwich, including Lound, with its glittering interior by Sir Ninian Comper.

This is how Betjeman's gives us Comper's assessment of his own work 'Gold on the font cover to emphasise the sacrament of Baptism as entry into the Church: gold on the screen to veil the mystery of Holy Communion at the altar...A church should pray of itself with its architecture. It is its own prayer and should bring you to your knees when you come in.'

Our church buildings are the laboratories of the imagination and the spirit. Like a gymnasium, they give us a place to go, where we can exercise the practise of faith. In this exercise we seek a spiritual health that will survive the gradual slowing up of our bodily mobility. The routine of hearing the remedy for our sins does eventually begin to convince us that we are loved and will be saved by God.

It is a fitting place for me to conclude, attended by words that rightly belong on the lips of penitent worshippers who have been present at the banquet of Christ to receive the remedy of God's mercy, whose minds are filled with grace and the pledge of future glory. Yes, the Prayer Book offers them words by which to direct their praise to heaven:

For thou only art holy, thou only art the Lord; thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost, art most high in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

(The Rt Revd Dr Martin Warner is the Bishop of Chichester)

Sunday Morning Prayer: Some Things Old Made New Again

JOHN BUNYAN

Sixteenth-century England witnessed violence, and deep religious division, in the realm of liturgy related especially to differing views of the Eucharist, some on each side sentencing those with opposing views to torture and death. All today, however, would think vernacular worship, and the daily offices of Matins or Morning Prayer ¹ and Evensong or Evening Prayer were good reforms. Scripturally based, these simplified the medieval services and were designed for the laity as well as the clergy.

Substantial liturgical reform began in 1549 with Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer (BCP), followed by his more Protestant but short-lived revision of 1552, the slightly more Catholic revisions of 1559 and 1604 (and in Scotland especially in 1637) and the present classic version of 1662. ² It took a century after the schism, with the near silencing of the Prayer Book under Cromwell, for many English people to come to hold the Prayer Book with affection, although with Puritan and especially Papist dissenters long suffering adverse discrimination in relation to its imposition.

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer provided a simple pattern of Sunday services for the reformed Church of England that remains unchanged in the subsequent revisions. ³ That pattern was the daily office of Matins, the Litany (said or sung also on Wednesdays and Fridays), and the Ante-Communion (including the sermon), and then, by the Communion itself only if there were some willing to receive the Sacrament with the priest, finally the office of Evensong.

Cranmer did want to see the Eucharist celebrated every Sunday but he regarded as even more important the receiving of the Sacrament by those present. However, for more than 500 years, Church of England people had received Communion usually only once a year and they were not ready to change. Grim warnings against unworthy reception, inserted from the 1552 Prayer Book onwards, did not encourage them to do so.

1 'Morning Prayer' has been the main Prayer Book name since 1552 and is the clearest description, but Mattins or Matins is the common alternative, except in the USA. 'Matins' is the more intelligible spelling.

2 See Brian Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (2011).

3 The 'pattern' was not new and it is still the pattern, e.g., of Orthodox Sunday morning worship.

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In practice, in most churches the Communion proper often thus came to be rarely celebrated. From the seventeenth century to the nineteenth, if people went to their parish church on Sunday morning, they attended that long, wordy, repetitive service, including four Scripture readings, enlivened perhaps only by a village band and singing of metrical psalms. The Sacrament was commonly celebrated only two or three times a year although in a few places much more often.

That morning service, tedious for some, nonetheless was nourishing for others, leaving its mark in all kinds of ways in the minds and hearts, and wisdom and writings of many, as shown by Norman Taylor in his anthology, *For Services Rendered*.⁴ And Morning Prayer in particular was for more than 300 years the chief Sunday service throughout the Anglican Communion and, in the nineteenth century basis also of some free church services, especially Unitarian Christian. It has been used, in a simple form at British and Australian military church parades, and at the Captain's service on British ships, and is the normal public Sunday service attended by the Queen. (And it is the closest to what we know of 'our Lord's own service' in the synagogue!) Where the English Church was predominant—and of course, except for rites of passage, there were always those who rarely if ever attended church—the words of Morning Prayer, including Lessons from the Authorised Version, for several centuries influenced more English-speaking people than have those of any other English language service since.

Slowly, however, in the nineteenth century practice changed. Early Sunday morning celebrations came about, encouraged by High Churchmen who believed in 'fasting Communion'. The main morning service was gradually shortened to Matins and sermon, sometimes with the Litany added. In time, Sunday Communion at 8 am became widespread but also on some or all Sundays, Communion after 11 am Matins. With better Confirmation preparation, more now remained for the Sacrament and sometimes Holy Communion replaced Matins, with monthly evening Communion also in some (mostly Evangelical) churches.

High Church teaching about the Eucharist as the one important Sunday service was renewed by the Anglo-Catholics and then came to influence those of other traditions, advanced by the 'Liturgical Movement' and in England by the mid-twentieth century Parish and People association, and such works as *The Parish Communion: A Book of Essays*, edited by Fr Gabriel Hebert SSM in 1937.

Until the unsettled 1960s the Anglican Communion remained tied together mainly by the Book of Common Prayer, either the widely used

⁴ See also 'The Book of Common Prayer and English Literature', chapter 4 of Barry Spurr, *The Word in the Desert: Anglican and Roman Catholic Reactions to Liturgical Reform* (1995)

1662 BCP or revisions modelled ⁵ upon it. However, calls for revision had long been made and from then on, replacements of Prayer Book services abounded, with many clergy and clericalised laymen absorbed with liturgical innovation, faced as they were with great social change and with the clergy losing even more of their non-liturgical roles.

There was, however, also opposition to innovations too often imposed without lay consultation. Hence in the Church of England, thanks to a sustained campaign for over forty years especially by the Prayer Book Society, the 1662 Prayer Book has remained quite important, still often used for early Sunday morning services and for Evensong although not often for the main Sunday Eucharist. For the latter the *Alternative Services Book* of 1980 came first, replaced now by many authorised books grouped under the hardly appropriate title of *Common Worship*, leading to great diversity in that Church's worship and the loss of any real common prayer.

In the Church of Australia the BCP has a stronger legal and constitutional status, as 'the standard of worship' ⁶ for 'use' in the Church, but in probably most parishes its services and often the book itself have disappeared except for some Choral Evensongs. Its services tended to be replaced at first by *An Australian Prayer Book* (AAPB) in 1978 and in 1995 by *A Prayer Book for Australia* (APBA) ⁷. APBA is used in most parishes outside Sydney Diocese and a few parishes within Sydney, suspicious of 1995's Eucharistic theology, have continued with the 1978 book, at least for the 'traditional' 8 am Sunday services although that book itself is now out of print. The Diocesan Synod has published *Common Prayer: Resources for gospel-shaped gatherings*, its services simpler than those of 1662 but also more Protestant than even the Prayer Book of 1552, in part a valiant attempt to retain some formal liturgy within a radically Evangelical diocese, but lacking canonical and constitutional authority.

Later, in the 1960s, with more folk watching television, the formerly well attended Evensong disappeared from most parishes although it has usually remained in cathedrals, where indeed it has been increasingly popular in recent years; it is also found in England, at least monthly, in many larger churches. Sunday Choral Matins still survives mainly in English and Irish cathedrals, and in Australia notably at St John's, Canberra (at 11 am, a time increasingly welcomed by people as they age). But in many English and Australian churches (and more recently in American

5 At that time these included e.g. the Irish 1926 BCP, the US 1928 BCP, the Scottish 1929 BCP, the 1961 BCP of the Church of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon, and the Canadian BCP of 1962, and also the Proposed English BCP of 1928, parts of which had come into quite wide use.

6 Strictly the BCP as it was in 1955. The Church of England BCP has changes made since then.

7 Bishop Donald Robinson regarded both books as authorised variants to the BCP, originally hoping that there might be a revised BCP for Australia. See his *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, chapters 29 and 30.

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⁸), the Eucharist is now the only Sunday service apart from occasional Evensongs and, in Evangelical parishes, informal services and various ‘Fresh Expressions’ of Church. (In many Sydney churches the Sacrament is sadly now downplayed, sound Evangelical Eucharistic scholarship ⁹ unknown or ignored, and little Anglican liturgy evident.)

In England as well as Australia, if our disunited Church is not to suffer more *today*, I think that we need some BCP services (and not only Evensong), with appropriate variations, on at least some Sundays, with some physical copies of the BCP available in all churches, and familiarity with it expected of the clergy and of ordinands. Furthermore, Anglican lay-people should be given their constitutional rights regarding the use of any alternative prayer book and other proposed service variations. And all this for literary, theological, pastoral and sociological reasons.

Holy Communion central, Morning Prayer basic

Those who sought a renewed centrality for the Eucharist emphasised the command attributed to Jesus by St Paul and found in the longer version of one Gospel passage (S.Luke 22.19b-20), and referred to in most Eucharistic liturgies.¹⁰ Recently, some modern scholars, such as (Australian) Andrew McGowan, in *Ascetic Eucharists*, and Paul Bradshaw, in *Eucharistic Origins*, have shown that the early story of the Sacrament is less simple, and the forms that it took in the earliest days more varied than has been thought. Be that as it may, there are still important reasons for seeing the Eucharist as the Church’s *central* service for the faithful, celebrated every Sunday in much of Christendom ¹¹, with Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and often Anglican devotion focused upon it. Whether or not Jesus commanded it, the Eucharist in one way or another is derived from our Lord’s meals with his friends and the meals of early followers of Jesus. Whether it should be the *only* service is the question that I raise, and looking at the wider scene, I think major cultural change (and decay) facing our English and Australian churches, and increasingly now American, are so similar that what I propose—a making of the old new again—is relevant to all three.

⁸ In the strong US Episcopal Church that I first knew fifty years ago, Morning Prayer still predominated.

⁹ For that, see e.g. Christopher Cocksworth’s *Evangelical Eucharistic Thought in the Church of England*, Jerryl Lowe, *An Anthology of Anglican Devotion and Theology*, and Donald Robinson, *Selected Works*, Volume 3, *Biblical and Liturgical Studies*.

¹⁰ The *Didache* and various early Eastern liturgies provide notable exceptions.

¹¹ In the Church of Scotland Communion may vary from weekly to twice yearly. It is usually based on the 1994 Book of Common Order. Ministers may use that ‘directory’ for ordinary Sunday services but there is no centuries-old, well-known, formal non-Eucharistic service corresponding to England’s Morning Prayer. However, I have found fine services comparable to Matins at S.Giles’s High Kirk in Edinburgh and especially in Paisley Abbey. (S.John’s Episcopal Church, Edinburgh has Choral Matins on most Sundays.)

Background to Two Proposals

Today there are many welcome developments in medicine, science, and environmental care. However, some rapidly occurring technological and commercial changes, particularly related to 'social media', are having adverse effects on literacy, the media, the humanities, and educational institutions in a more secular society¹² and more people claim to have 'no religion' whatever some mean by that. The Churches' influence has declined, adversely affected by hitherto unreported abuse, by aggressive atheism, and by greater awareness that God's action is difficult to discern as we hear more of 'wars and rumours of wars', have more understanding of scientific discoveries, and share environmental fears. Ever greater conundrums are presented by newer scientific knowledge that presents a far more serious challenge to 'orthodox' Christian doctrines than many of their defenders yet realise.

Some countering of adverse trends is developing, some wise, some not. Narrow forms of conservative Evangelicalism, but also 'political correctness' in some liberal churches, draw some but repel too many others. And there are many other attractions—alternative forms of spirituality, indigenous and Asian religion, much sport, and growing practical interest in conservation, the latter an example of good 'kingdom' activity that for many increasingly takes the place of church.

The First Proposal : Reviving Matins for the 2020s

My theses are based upon post-graduate studies since 1963 but also on parish, school, and college experience for well over 60 years, including continuing honorary hospital chaplaincy now for over twenty-two years. In hospital many whom I meet identify as C of E or Anglican but, to use Alan Billing's words in his *Lost Church :Why We Must Find it Again*, most of those 'belong' but do not attend.¹³

My first proposal arises out of concern for some of those Anglicans on or beyond the fringe. In addition to a 'central role'¹⁴ for the Holy Communion, available every Sunday whenever that is possible, I propose a 'basic' service of BCP Sunday Morning Prayer, weekly, monthly, or on special days, in accord with our own liturgical tradition, providing for some of the many Anglicans not confirmed nor deeply committed, and a service able to be related to major concerns of today. Some ministers would not entertain this proposal, but in general it is undergirded by words of some scholars of the major (mainly Anglican) traditions.

12 Jonathan Holland, *The Destiny & Passion of P NW Strong*, page 407, writes of how 'a once solidly literate society with its emphasis on analysis, reason,. structure and logic..out of which sprang the ... BCP conceded ground to an audio-visual society.'

13 See also his *Making God Possible*, Part 1, Present Realities; although even tougher social challenges have arisen since this was published in 2010 including now the various effects of COVID-19.

14 Paul Bradshaw in Aidan Platten, ed., *Grasping the Heel of Heaven*, 2018, p.162

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Those scholars include Canon Trevor Beeson writing on church music (*In Tuneful Accord*), Canon Alan Billings, especially in *Lost Church and Making God Possible*, Presbyterian Dr Ian Bradley in *Marching to the Promised Land : Has the Church a Future ?*, high churchman Canon H.J.Burgess in *The Prayer Book Society Guide to Morning Prayer*, Dr Alan L.Hayes of Toronto's Wycliffe College, and Professor John Webster, now of Aberdeen University, in *What Happened to Morning Prayer ? : The Service of the Word as a Principal Sunday Liturgy*, ex-atheist Peter Hitchens in *The Rage Against God*, Bishop John Pritchard in *God Lost and Found*, Gavin Reid in *To Canterbury with Love*, Canon George Sumner, Episcopal Bishop of Dallas in the 2010 (Canadian) 'Anglican Journal', Paul Zahl, evangelical US Episcopalian, in *Exploring the Worship Spectrum* and, not least, missionary Bishop Michael Marshall, in *Free to Worship : Creating Transcendent Worship Today*. Even leading Episcopalian liturgical scholar, Paul Bradshaw, now questions some aspects of the twentieth-century Liturgical Movement, doing so most recently in chapter 3 of *Grasping the Heel of Heaven*.

Bishop Marshall has welcomed the positive benefits of the Parish and People movement but, referring to England, he thinks that 'a rigid and unquestioning application of the People and Parish Movement will serve only to unchurch this nation'. Earlier, Trevor Beeson, writing in 1988, so too noted that 'what was not foreseen by us who pressed for liturgical change' was the extent to which it 'would effectively sever the connection between the Church of England and the very large number of English people who attend worship in their parish church only occasionally but nonetheless regard themselves as ... church members'.¹⁵ There may be some exaggeration in such assessments. As noted earlier, many other factors have also been involved,¹⁶ but there is also, I think, important truth in those assessments, needing much greater recognition by the clergy.

Peter Blengrove has written that 'Matins is a service that the Church can ill afford to neglect, for not only is it a magnificent vehicle of worship, but, even more importantly, it provides a form of worship for both the committed and the uncommitted, including the unconfirmed. For those who are not communicants and for those on the fringe of the Church, the Eucharist, however 'popular' its language, can appear exclusive.'¹⁷

George Sumner emphasizes the centrality of Communion but he suggests what we might ponder, that the 'dramatic increase in eucharistic celebrations' in many places has not 'heightened eucharistic

15 'Reform of Renewal' in Eric James, ed., *God's Truth*. On any statistical correlation, see Roger Homan in Peter Mullen, ed., *The Real Common Worship*, chapter 3.

16 See e.g. Tom Baker, 'Is Liturgy in Good Shape ?', in Eric James, *ibid.* See also Steve Aisthorpe, *The Invisible Church : Learning from the Experiences of Churchless Christians*.

17 *The Prayer Book Society Journal*, Advent 2009.

devotion' and 'self- preparation is now sparse.' He thinks that Morning Prayer, a 'jewel' of the Prayer Book tradition and distinctive of Anglican spirituality, 'would seem to be a better format for a seeker service'.¹⁸

Holy Communion will not and does not draw in every Anglican, but as those scholars generally show, a simple but 'deep church' Morning Prayer—with wise and imaginative variation and flexibility—could provide one service, even a short one, where fringe-dwellers, agnostics, and cultural Anglicans who wish to maintain some association with their Christian origins might feel at home. Some in time might come closer. Of course, most 'nominal' Anglicans are not likely to appear but more might come *occasionally*.

Matins as a separate service, devised particularly for those people, I think should be almost invisibly mended in the light of modern accepted Scriptural and scientific studies. Some elements in the services can create unnecessary obstructions.¹⁹

There are now many various small 'fresh expressions of church', at least in England, fewer in Australia—and indeed *older* 'expressions' such as hymn festivals. These fresh expressions need to be linked to our Church's tradition but for the main parish services and what Paul Maclean and Michael Thompson in *Seeking the Seekers* describe as 'historic-cultural churches', variety can be excessive when people often move, and because our Church needs more commonality. For the Roman Catholic Church, the Mass provides this and 'an agreed doctrinal tradition' that our Church lacks, with, as Paul Bradshaw has written recently, the bonds of our unity now 'stretched to breaking point'.²⁰ ('Free expression' elements can be incorporated when appropriate.)

I think that *Sunday Morning Prayer*, adapted as suggested, could help draw our Church back from 'congregational', sometimes even sectarian extremes, towards what sociologist Dr Linda Woodhead has described as its 'societal' centre of gravity, and not least provide also for moderate Anglicans, commended by Phillip Aspinall, Archbishop of Brisbane, when he defended comprehensive Anglican diversity 'in the face of the current Evangelical ascendancy and the diminished influence of Anglo-Catholicism' in Australia.²¹ They are fortunate who can find something like Liverpool's Cathedral, England's most Evangelical in the best sense, with a richly diverse ministry that its Dean from 2012 to 2017, now Bishop of Sheffield, Pete Wilcox, described as 'non-partisan' and non-tribal.²²

18 In the (Canadian) *Anglican Journal*, reference mislaid.

19 I have attempted this in my *Conservation, Common Prayer and Communion*.

20 Paul Bradshaw, *op.cit.*, p.64ff. He notes the loss of 'common prayer', pp 62-63.

21 Address to Brisbane Diocesan Synod, 2015.

22 In 1950 about one third of parishes in the large Diocese of Sydney were moderate. Few are now.

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(All that I write assumes a return to more or less normal Sunday worship as COVID-19 is countered. I tend to think that beyond that, some ‘streaming of services’ will remain, and perhaps especially programmes designed for that media and which are largely not ‘liturgical’ in form although able to incorporate liturgical segments, I hope from the BCP.)

The Second Proposal : Matins in place of Ante-Communion

My parishioners voted for their favourite among our morning services²³ and chose our 1st, 3rd, and 5th Sunday liturgy, BCP Matins in place of the Ante Communion (in effect the ‘mass of the catechumens’) followed by Holy Communion from *Sursum Corda*, a format authorised although rare in Australian, English, and now American Churches.²⁴ This might be the best service for great festivals, reviving the older nineteenth-century pattern made suitable for today, with a simple, flexible form of 1662/1928 Matins²⁵, continuing, perhaps after some kind of interlude, with Holy Communion for the majority of now regular church-goers for whom the Sacrament on those days is very important.

BCP Matins happily retains Myles Coverdale’s unsurpassed translation of the Psalms and Matins, alone or instead of Ante Communion, would restore to Sunday morning worship substantial psalmody and the BCP canticles, able to be sung to simple chants or classical settings, valuable in places lacking Evensong.²⁶ Matins also allows more emphasis on our Lord’s own (Old Testament) Scriptures, and I should commend for both²⁷ another English classic, the Authorised Version (or when unclear, the Revised Standard, New Revised Standard, or English Standard).²⁸

23 Our other service, on the 2nd and 4th Sundays, was Merbecke Choral Communion.

24 BCP Matins could be followed by the APBA 2nd Order Communion from the Offertory and *Sursum Corda*.

25 Not the ‘modernised’ BCP forms included in AAPB and APBA. The language of the BCP is more melodious, resonant and memorable and is as easily understood.

26 *My Sing Heart and Mind* contains 112 BCP psalms or psalm portions, arranged for thirty-one mornings and evenings of the month but with unobtrusive corrections and annotations, and various appendices. A chapter based on it (‘sheer erudition’ according to the *Quadrant* review !) is included in Catherine A. Runcie, ed., *The Free Mind : Essays and Poems in Honour of Barry Spurr*, Edwin H. Lowe Publishing, 2016.

27 For the Lessons various official lectionaries are available but if Matins is a separate service, the Minister might perhaps carefully choose readings. From Advent to Trinity Sunday, they should be Calendar-related, at other times, Lessons carefully chosen for major saints’ days and festivals, patronal festivals, Biblical studies, and anniversaries. However, especially where Matins takes the place of the Ante-Communion, I think the CW, AAPB, or APBA version of the three year lectionary should be used, with the first Lesson always from the Old Testament or Apocrypha, and the second normally the Gospel (perhaps preceded by the other New Testament Lesson).

28 Like ‘modern’ services, Matins can build on its substantial Scriptural foundation with repeated seasonal ceremonies, good traditional and modern hymns, instrumental and vocal solos, and sermons in one form or another—related to personal and social concerns of many kinds. And, liturgy being more than words, silences, and physical elements involving a different part of our brain, of course are important.

The Language of BCP Morning Prayer

Finally, as already shown, I support the traditional language of BCP Matins (almost always retained at Choral Evensongs), and on literary, linguistic and even spiritual grounds. It is commended, for example, in *The Language of Common Prayer* by Stella Brook, *The Sound of Liturgy* by Cally Hammond, *Neither Archaic nor Obsolete* by Peter Toon and Louis R. Tarsitano, *The BCP : Past, Present and Future*, edited by Prudence Dailey, *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language* by Australian Don Watson, and various writings by David Martin, in the testimony of writers such as W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, P.D. James, R.S. Thomas, Evelyn Underhill and A.N. Wilson ²⁹, and in the stories of those drawn back to the Church by BCP services, for example, philosopher C.E.M. Joad long ago, ex-atheist Peter Hitchens more recently. And there is also evidence of fresh appreciation of that language by some well-educated American younger people, ³⁰ although of course there is some distance to go !

As for 'thee', 'thou' and 'thine', *today* these pronouns hint that God is not 'a person' but the transcendent and immanent divine Reality or Presence, beyond all our conceiving, in whom we live and move and have our being, encountering us not only in our Lord but in our neighbour and in all that is good, true and lovely, in serendipity as well as in sorrow, in judgment as well as in joy, and not least in the psalms sung or said, and words of Scripture expounded wisely and listened to carefully, in Morning Prayer, or 'Mattens', the title of one of George Herbert's poems :

I cannot open mine eyes
But thou art ready there to catch
My morning-soul and sacrifice.

(The Revd Dr John Bunyan is an Australian priest of Sydney Diocese and on 20 March 2020 just as churches were being closed, he marked the sixtieth anniversary of his ordination as a priest with a celebration of 1662 Holy Communion at Christ Church St Laurence, Sydney. He has post graduate qualifications from Sydney, London, Durham (St Chad's), and Lambeth, and from the San Francisco Theological Seminary. He has had parish, school, cathedral and college experience, serving in the UK as well as Australia, his last post before retirement that of a rector of a Sydney parish for 22 years.)

29 About 500 eminent persons in England signed the three 1979 Petitions published in PN Review 13.

30 See *Issues in Prayer Book Revision*, Volume 1, a collection of essays by US Episcopalian scholars including Bryan Spinks, and Australian Andrew McGowan referred to above.

Thoughts on The Prayer Book

J. C. RYLE

There is probably no book in existence, next to the Bible, which is so well known, and yet so little appreciated, as the English Book of Common Prayer. Out of the myriads who hold the book in their hands on Sundays, I suspect few have ever considered the immense value of a liturgical form, and fewer still have ever realized the peculiar excellencies and principles of the Church of England liturgy. On these three subjects I propose to say a few words in this paper, which I think may prove useful to many readers.

I. First and foremost, I propose to say something about the *general usefulness of forms of prayer in public worship*. I frankly admit that on this point Christians are not entirely of one mind. How does the matter stand? In what respect do the visible Churches of Christ differ? Let me answer these questions.

Some Churches hold, that no prepared form of prayer ought ever to be used. They leave this part of worship entirely in the hands of the minister, and trust to the Spirit guiding him aright. They say that the prayers ought to be unwritten or extempore prayers. This is the opinion held by the Scotch Presbyterians, and by the greater part of the English dissenters in our own land.

Other Churches hold that it is best to have a form of prayer prepared, and to require the minister to use it. They leave the minister no discretion in the matter. They supply him with a book of prayers, and direct him to read out of this book, whenever the congregation assembles for public worship. This is the opinion held by the Church of England, by the Irish Church, by the Episcopal Church of America, and by a few other denominations.

Now, which of these two plans of public worship is the best? Which is wisest? Which is most edifying? Which is most profitable? I want to say something about these questions, and I invite the reader's serious attention. My own opinion is decided and unhesitating. I am by conscientious choice a minister of the Church of England. I think it is far better to have a form of public prayers than to have extempore prayer. I will now give some reasons why I think so.

Before I say a word about the question, let me remind the reader that the matter is not one which is necessary to salvation. I do not for

a moment say that there can be no acceptable public Christian worship without a Prayer-book. I am only saying what appears to me the most useful manner of worship. The point I am considering is not one of those on which mistakes may ruin souls. Beside this, let me remind the reader that I am not about to make a special defence of the Prayer-book of the Church of England. I am quite ready to do that before I conclude this paper. The immediate question before us is not whether a certain liturgy is a good one, but whether it is good to have any liturgy at all. All that I wish to do at present is to give some general reasons why forms of public prayer appear to me very preferable to extempore prayer.

(a) In the first place, extempore prayer makes the congregation entirely dependent on the minister's health or circumstances, or what are commonly called his frames and feelings. He may be sick and ill when he is leading their devotions. He may be depressed in spirit by family trials or private affliction. Whenever this is the case, his people are sure to suffer. A minister is only a man. If he prays extempore, his 'frames and feelings' must necessarily give a tone and colour and bias to his prayers. But this could not be the case, if he prayed from a book.

(b) In the second place, extempore prayer makes the congregation entirely dependent on the minister's memory. He may forget many things which he ought to pray for, and meant to pray for, before he entered the Church. He may omit to mention many things before God which he had privately intended to make subjects of prayer. He is only a man, and his memory is liable to error. But this could not happen if he prayed from a book.

(c) In the third place, extempore prayer makes the congregation entirely dependent on the minister's soundness in doctrine. He may be gradually falling away from the faith, and slipping into Romanism, or Socinianism, or Scepticism. He 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.

(d) In the fourth place, extempore prayer makes it almost impossible for the congregation to join in public worship. They cannot possibly know what the minister is going to pray for. They must keep their minds continually on the stretch while he is praying, and may sometimes lose the thread of his prayer. They may even not understand him sometimes on account of his language, just as they do not always understand his preaching. But this could not happen if he prayed from a book.

(e) In the last place, extempore prayer, in course of time, becomes as much a form to most congregations as any form of prayer that ever was composed. The thoughts of ministers, after a few years, are found

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to run pretty much in the same groove, and upon the same rails. Their hearers, after a few years, know perfectly well their phrases, their modes of expression, and the order of their petitions. They can even make a shrewd guess how long the prayer will last, and when it is drawing near to a close. When this is the case, and all who have worshipped in the Presbyterian Churches of Scotland know well that it is so, it really becomes just as formal an act to pray extempore as to pray from a book!

I lay these things before the attention of my readers, and commend them to their serious consideration. I commend them especially to Churchmen. I ask them not to be shaken in mind by the common charges which are made against our manner of worshipping God in the Church of England. It is easy for ignorant or thoughtless persons to say that to use a Prayer-book is 'Popish', 'legal', 'formal', 'bondage', and the like. It is easy to say that extempore prayer is a more 'spiritual' mode of worship. It is far more easy to say such things than to prove them. People too often catch these sayings from one another, and repeat them without calm and sober thinking. If some of the enemies of the Church of England would read and consider a little more than they do, they would perhaps not talk so foolishly as they sometimes do.

Let me make a few general remarks before I pass away from this branch of my subject.

1. Salvation does not depend on being a member of a Church which has a Prayer-book, or of a Church which permits nothing but extempore prayer. We must each individually be born again, repent of sin, believe on Christ, become new creatures, and live holy lives. Without this it will matter nothing at the last day what we thought about extempore prayer.

2. Extempore prayer may sometimes be extremely solemn, spiritual, soul-exalting, and heart-edifying. I have sometimes heard clergymen of the Church of England pray extempore in public, so beautifully that I could desire nothing better. If all men prayed always, as some men do sometimes, there would be nothing better than extempore prayer. But all ministers are not highly gifted. The question to be considered is, what mode of worship is most likely to be carried on effectively and profitably to a congregation, from week to week, and month to month, and year to year, by the average run of ministers? Taking a broad view of ministers, if I must choose, I would far rather that most ministers prayed from a book.

3. Prayer from a book may often be spoilt by the bad reading of the minister. He may read so rapidly, or so low, or so irreverently, as to do no good to the congregation. He may even weary and disgust his congregation. But forms of prayer are not to be judged by the reading of careless and unconverted ministers. Let a man hear a Prayer-book read reverently, carefully, audibly, and emphatically, with all the congregation joining, before he finds fault with 'formal prayers'. Forms may be read

spiritually quite as easily as extempore prayers may be used formally.

4. Finally, let all Churchmen who hanker after extempore prayer, and profess to be weary of the Prayer-book, spend a few months in Scotland, and attend no other worship but that of the Presbyterians. They will hear many good prayers, I have no doubt. They will sometimes be much edified and pleased. The Church of Chalmers and M'Cheyne contains ministers who would adorn any Church on earth. But at the end of a few months, unless I am greatly mistaken, most sensible Churchmen will return home convinced that, in the long run, there is nothing so useful for a congregation as a good form of prayer.

The Church that has good, sound, Scriptural, fervent extempore prayers, in my judgment, does well. But the Church that has a well-composed, well-arranged Scriptural liturgy, in my judgment, does far better. The way of 'forms' in public worship is better than the way of 'extempore' prayer.

II. From the general usefulness of forms of prayer, I pass on to speak of the *special excellencies of the English Prayer-book*.

The times in which we live make the subject of special importance. The Prayer-book is constantly assailed by enemies of every description. Even Churchmen are too ready to see the alleged blemishes of the book, and to forget its merits. In times like these it may be well to arm the friends of the Liturgy with a few simple arguments in its behalf.

It may clear our way to remind the reader once more that the question I am now considering is not the comparative merit of extempore or of pre-composed prayer in public worship. That question has been already fully considered in the former part of this paper. The one single point to which our attention will be directed is the special value of the Liturgy of the Church of England. Granting that a man is convinced that a form of prayer is best, let me try to show him that we have many reasons to be thankful for the form provided for worshippers in the Church of England. Furthermore, it may clear our way to remind the reader that I do not for a moment maintain that the Prayer-book is free from defects. It was not given by inspiration, like the Bible. It was drawn up by uninspired men, who had their failings and infirmities; and, like everything else that comes from the hands of unassisted man, it is imperfect. I claim no infallibility for the Prayer-book. I fairly admit that there are things in it which might have been done better. But I am bold to say that its merits far outstrip its defects; its blemishes are few and far between; its excellencies are very many and very great. The chaff of the Liturgy is little compared to the wheat, and the dross trifling compared to the gold.

Let me now set down in order some of the leading merits of the Church of England Prayer-book. Before we give ear to the charges which some Dissenters and some Scotch Presbyterians sometimes make against

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our venerable Liturgy, let us consider calmly its many claims to our confidence.

(1) The first merit of the Prayer-book is the *large quantity of God's Word* which it contains. A very considerable portion of the volume is neither more nor less than extracts from the Bible. To say nothing of other parts, the Psalms, the Epistles, and the Gospels make no small part of the whole book. The man who pours indiscriminate abuse on the Liturgy, would do well to remember this. Let him consider that more than one-half of a Churchman's form of worship consists of selected passages of Holy Scripture.

(2) The second merit of the Prayer-book is the *sound doctrine* that runs through the daily prayers and petitions, which it puts in the mouth of those who use it. The sinfulness of man, the holiness of God, the redemption of sinners by our Lord Jesus Christ, the daily need in which we all stand of the Holy Spirit, the importance of godly living, the sinfulness and guilt of sin, the weakness of human nature, the personality of the devil, the reality and eternity of hell and heaven, the full supply of mercy and grace which is laid up for us in Christ, all these things appear again and again in the prayers of the Liturgy. Expressions no doubt may be pointed out in the Services for Baptism, Burial, and the Visitation of the Sick, which admit of misconstruction, and are often sadly misconstrued ; but these expressions after all are few in number. No impartial judge can deny that the general tone of Prayer-book prayers is Scriptural, Evangelical, and sound.

(3) The third merit of the Prayer-book is the *wide variety of subjects* which its petitions embrace. 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. It is not too much to say that no Church on earth brings so many matters before God in its public worship as the Church of England.

(4) The fourth merit of the Prayer-book is the *congregational character* of the worship which it invites those who use it to offer up. It does not give the office of praying entirely to the minister, and leave the people to sit by in silence and listen. It frequently directs 'the people' in its rubrics. It assigns to every member of the congregation a place in the worship. It invites all to join audibly in the confession of sin and declaration of faith. It requires all to read a portion of the service together with the minister. It calls on all to say 'amen' after every prayer which the minister reads. Of all foolish

sayings against the Church of England there is none so foolish as the saying that it is a 'Popish' and 'priest-ridden' Church! No Church on earth makes so much of the laity in public worship as the Church of England.

(5) The fifth merit of the Prayer-book is its wonderful suitableness to the wants of the poor and unlearned. 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. They give him time to take breath. They enable him to begin again, if he has lost the thread of the last petition. They help to keep his slumbering mind awake, by the constant change of voice, and repeated 'amens' which he cannot help hearing. The Litany alone is a simple but eminently comprehensive collection of petitions, which even a child, if attentive, can hardly fail to understand.

(6) The last, but not the least, merit of the English Prayer-book is the immense proportion of intercession which it contains. It calls on those who use it to remember others before God as well as themselves. It encourages habits of sympathy and fellow-feeling with all mankind. It keeps up a constant testimony against the selfishness to which we are all naturally prone. It invites us to speak to God for others as well as for ourselves. In no Church on earth perhaps is the command to 'pray for one another' so faithfully remembered, in theory at least, if not in practice, as in the Church of England.

Such are the six leading excellencies of the English Prayer-book. Each one of these six is a text, on which much more might be said, if space permitted. Each contains a seed of thought, which Churchmen would do well to lay up in their minds and remember.

The practical conclusions which may be drawn from what has been said deserve serious consideration. They ought to be pondered well by all who call themselves members of the Church of England.

For one thing, if the English Prayer-book contain so many excellencies, we ought not to esteem it lightly, or think it of no consequence whether we hear it used on Sunday or not. Salvation, no doubt, does not depend on going to Church. It is not necessary to use a Prayer-book in order to get to heaven. A personal interest in Christ is the one thing needful. Experimental acquaintance with the grace of the Holy Ghost is far more important than acquaintance with the English Liturgy. But still, though all this is true, there is no denying that our edification in public worship depends greatly on the kind of prayers that are prayed. Let the Churchman know that he ought to be more thankful for his Prayer-book. He may

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often perhaps hear better preaching in chapel than in Church. But he may depend upon it he will not often hear better prayers.

For another thing, if the English Prayer-book contains so many excellencies, the members of the Church of England ought not to be ashamed of defending it, and maintaining its cause. Let them speak out boldly when they hear men assailing the Prayer-book and saying evil things about it. Let them ask the assailants whether they know anything about the subject of which they are speaking. Let them challenge them fearlessly to point out any better worship than that which the Church of England provides. It is easy to say that the Prayer-book is imperfect, faulty, and defective. It is not quite so easy to show us the extempore prayers that are better. Of its ministers, the Church of England may well be ashamed sometimes. But it never need be ashamed of its Liturgy.

Finally, if the English Prayer-book contains so many excellencies, let English Churchmen study the book more, and be more acquainted with its contents. Few, alas! know much about it. Ignorance is the great danger of many who consider themselves excellent members of the Church of England. They are little acquainted either with the Articles or Liturgy of their own Communion. They can hardly tell you what their Church asks them to believe, or how their Church bids them worship. One of the great wants of the day, next to more praying, is more thinking and more reading.

III. The last thing I propose to do is to offer to all my readers a broad general caution about the English Prayer-book. That caution is simply this. Take care that you clearly understand the *great leading principle on which the Prayer-book was at first compiled*, and on which it was always meant to be interpreted. It is a principle which runs throughout the book from end to end. The mischief which has arisen, and the false teaching which has flowed from gross ignorance or neglect of this principle, are simply incalculable.

The principle of the Prayer-book is, to suppose all members of the Church to be in *reality* what they are in *profession*, to be true believers in Christ, to be sanctified by the Holy Ghost. The Prayer-book takes the highest standard of what a Christian ought to be, and all through its prayers is worded accordingly. The minister addresses those who assemble together for public worship as *believers*. The people who use the words the liturgy puts into their mouths, are supposed to be believers. But those who drew up the Prayer-book never meant to assert that all who were members of the Church of England were actually and really true Christians. On the contrary, they tell us expressly in the Articles, that 'in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good'. But they held that if forms of devotion were drawn up at all, they must be drawn up on the supposition that those who used them were real Christians, and not false ones. And in so doing I think they were quite right. A liturgy for unbelievers and unconverted men would be unreasonable,

and practically useless. The part of the congregation for whom it was meant would care little or nothing for any liturgy at all. The holy and believing part of the congregation would find its language entirely unsuited to them.

(a) This general principle of the Prayer-book is the principle on which the *baptismal service* is drawn up. It supposes those who bring their children to be baptized, to bring them as *believers*. As the seed of godly parents and children of believers their infants are baptized. As believers, the sponsors and parents are exhorted to pray that the child may be born again, and encouraged to lay hold on the promises. And as *the child of believers* the infant when baptized is pronounced 'regenerate', and thanks are given for it. But the Prayer-book does not teach the invariable regeneration of all who are baptized.

(b) This principle is that on which the *Communion Office and Confirmation Service* are evidently framed. I suppose that no intelligent person would seriously maintain that all the communicants who say, 'the remembrance of our sins is grievous and the burden of them is intolerable' do really feel and mean what they say! You have only to search their characters and lives, and you soon find that many of them feel nothing of the kind. So also I presume no one of common sense really believes that all the young persons, who are confirmed, do really think that they are 'bound to believe and do' what they profess, when they say in reply to the Bishop's question, 'I do'. Too many, it may be feared, never think at all. But in both cases the Prayer-book puts in the mouths of those who are confirmed or come to the table, the language they ought to use, on the great ruling principle of charitable supposition. But it does not in the least follow that all is right because the language is used.

(c) This is the only principle on which many of the *collects* can be reasonably explained. The collect for the Epiphany says, 'Grant that we who know Thee now by faith may after this life have the fruition of Thy glorious Godhead'. Will anyone tell us that the compilers of the Prayer-book meant to teach, that all who use the Prayer-book do know God by faith? Surely not. The collect for Sexagesima Sunday says, 'Lord God, who seest that we put not our trust in anything that we do', etc. Will any dare to say that these words could ever be literally true of all members of the Church of England? Are they not manifestly a charitable supposition? The collect for the Third Sunday after Trinity says, 'We to whom Thou hast given a hearty desire to pray', etc. Who can have a doubt that this is a form of words, which is used by many of whom it could not strictly and truly be said for one minute? Who can fail to see in all these instances one uniform principle, the principle of charitably assuming that members of a Church are what they profess to be? The Church puts in the mouth of her worshipping people the sentiments

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and language they ought to use, and if they do not come up to her high standard the fault is theirs, not hers. But to say that by adopting such expressions she stamps and accredits all her members as real and true Christians in the sight of God would be manifestly unreasonable.

(d) This is the only principle on which *the service for the churching of women* can be interpreted. Every woman for whom that service is used, is spoken of as 'the Lord's servant', and is required to answer that she 'puts her trust in the Lord'. Yet who in his senses can doubt that such words are utterly inapplicable in the case of a great proportion of the women who come to be church'd? They are not 'servants of the Lord'. They do not in any sense 'put their trust' in Him. And who would dare to argue that the compilers of the liturgy considered that all women who were church'd did really trust in the Lord, merely because they used this language? The simple explanation is, that they drew up the service on the same great principle which runs through the whole Prayer-book, the principle of charitable supposition.

(e) This is the only principle on which *the service of baptism for grown-up people* can be interpreted. In that service the minister first prays that the person about to be baptized may have the Holy Spirit given to him, and be born again. The Church cannot take upon herself to pronounce decidedly that he is born again, until he has witnessed a good confession, and shown his readiness to receive the seal of baptism. Then, after that prayer, he is called upon openly to profess repentance and faith before the minister and congregation, and, that being done, he is baptized. Then, and not till then, comes the declaration that the person baptized is 'regenerate', and is born again and made an heir of everlasting salvation. But can these words be strictly and literally true, if the person baptized is a hypocrite, and has all along professed that which he does not feel? Are not the words manifestly used on the charitable supposition that he has repented and does believe, and in no other sense at all? And is it not plain to everyone, that in the absence of this repentance and faith, the words used are a mere form, used because the Church cannot draw up two forms, but not for a moment implying that inward and spiritual grace necessarily accompanies the outward sign, or that a death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness is necessarily conveyed to the soul? In short, the person baptized is pronounced 'regenerate' upon the broad principle of the Prayer-book, that, in the Church services, people are charitably supposed to be what they profess to be.

(f) This is the only intelligible principle on which *the burial service* can be interpreted. In that service the person buried is spoken of as a dear brother or sister. It is said that it hath pleased God of His great mercy to take to Himself his soul. It is said, 'We give Thee hearty thanks that it hath pleased Thee to deliver this our brother out of the miseries of this

sinful world'. It is said that 'our hope is this our brother rests in Christ'. Now what does all this mean? Did the compilers of the Prayer-book wish us to believe that all this was strictly and literally applicable to every individual member of the Church over whose body these words were read? Will any one look the service honestly in the face and dare to say so? I cannot think it. The simple explanation of the service is, that it was drawn up, like the rest, on the presumption that all members of a Church were what they professed to be. The key to the interpretation of it is the same great principle, the principle of charitable supposition.

(g) This is the only principle on which the *Catechism* can be interpreted. In it every child is taught to say, 'In baptism I was made a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven' and a little further on, 'I learn to believe in God the Holy Ghost who sanctifieth me and all the elect people of God'. Now what does this mean? Did the Prayer-book writers intend to lay it down as an abstract principle that all baptized children are sanctified and all elect? Will any one in the present day stand forth and tell us that all the children in his parish are actually sanctified by the Holy Ghost? If he can, I can only say that his parish is an exception, or else Bible words have no meaning. But I cannot yet believe that anyone would say so. I believe there is but one explanation of all these expressions in the *Catechism*. They are the words of charitable supposition, and in no other sense can they be taken.

How anyone can fail to see this principle running through the Prayer-book services, is one of those things which I fail to understand. It is quite certain that St. Paul wrote his epistle in the New Testament to the Churches upon this principle. He constantly addresses their members as 'saints' and elect, and as having grace, and faith, and hope, and love, though it is evident that some of them had no grace at all! I am firmly convinced that the compilers of our Prayer-book drew up its services upon the same lines, the lines of charitable supposition; and it is on this principle alone that the book can be interpreted.

With this caution I close this paper on the English Liturgy. No one can value the book more than I do, and the longer I live the more I value it. But I warn my readers never to forget that one principle runs through it all. That principle is the principle that worshippers really are what they profess to be. On that principle the book is incomparable as a manual of public worship. And without that principle people are apt to draw from it mischievous lessons, which it was never meant to teach.

(J.C. Ryle (1816-1900) was the first Bishop of Liverpool. 'Thoughts on the Prayer Book' forms Chapter 9 of *Principles for Churchmen* (1900))