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Principles of Prayer Book Revision

BY ALEC MOTYER

THE fact of Prayer Book revision and the demand for Prayer Book revision are two quite distinct matters. It is one of the certainties of our time in the Church of England that Prayer Book revision will continue to be pressed, and that this pressure will find some sort of realization in altered and even new forms of public worship. But to what extent such pressure and its results reflect a real desire of the majority of our church is an entirely different affair. On the one hand, clergy who, for doctrinal reasons of their own, find the book of 1662 unacceptable, are vocal for the legalization of what they have long illegally practised; on the other hand, clergy whose personal taste in worship stands closer to the non-liturgical practices of non-conformity are—albeit less vocally—desirous of seeing some modification of the present position. But it is very likely that the vast majority of Anglican laity (of clergy also?) are settled in their satisfaction with the *status quo*, and, were they to think of it at all, would view with distaste any prospect that what was in the beginning should not be also now and for ever.

Herein, of course, lies our greatest danger at this moment of undoubted change. It is not enough that the mass of church people should passively acquiesce in the *status quo*, or that, however unwillingly, should be levered into some experimentation or acceptance of new forms simply on the ground that the vicar, or the bishop, thinks it preferable. It is essential that matters as vital as these should be judged on grounds of principle. For this reason we set ourselves to ask whether from Scripture we can learn what principles ought to govern Christian worship, and whether from consideration of past practice and present need in the Church of England we can reach any positive leading ideas.

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We will take as our starting point one of Paul's illuminating incidental references. In Eph. 5: 18f., as he urges upon Christians that "careful walk" which is fitting for them, he stresses first the negative precept of avoidance of the world's joys and stimuli, and secondly the positive precept of a continuing enjoyment of the blessings of the Spirit of God. It is at this point that his teaching becomes relevant to our purpose: for he pauses to say, as it were incidentally, what are the marks of the Spirit-filled church. We do not wish to remark upon the fact that their joy was expressed in "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs", but rather call attention to what might be described as the focal points of their outward expression of Christian joy. It was "one to another", "with your heart", and "to the Lord". Thus, in summary fashion, the apostle unerringly puts his finger on three great biblical principles of worship in the Church of God.

First of all, the Church worships as a *congregation*, and not as a mere aggregation of individuals. Worship is so to be conducted that the unity of the Church finds expression. Individual idiosyncrasies are to be blended into a truly corporate act. Such outward expressions, "one to another", are said by Paul to be Spirit-inspired. It is not surprising, therefore, to find this practice illustrated and encouraged throughout the whole Bible. It was so in the great festivals of the Old Testament wherein God commanded the assembling of His people. Likewise, attentive reading of the Psalms shows many of them as plainly congregational, sometimes (*e.g.*, Ps. 136) securing the expression of united praise by congregational response. In the same way, in the New Testament, the Church was encouraged by our Lord Himself to expect a special blessing in truly corporate seeking of God (Mt. 18: 19f.); He and His apostles joined in corporate acts of worship (Mk. 14: 26); the apostolic Church is frequently found unitedly at prayer (Acts 1: 14; 2: 46; 4: 23ff; 12: 5, 12; 20: 36; 21: 5); Hebrews adds a special exhortation to honour the congregational meeting (10: 25); and the Revelation never fails to stir the Christian heart as it depicts the glorious and united praise that continually surrounds the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. 4: 11; 5: 9, 12; *etc.*).

Secondly, however, in the line of biblical foci of worship, we must so worship corporately that the individual is not lost. In the corporate act, there must be the worship of the individual. Worship is not only "one to the other" but also "with the heart". This balance between individual and community finds excellent exemplification in the Holy Communion. On the one hand, here is the highest demonstration of unity, in that "we who are many, are one bread, one body; for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10: 17); and yet, on the other hand, what could be more individualistic than the actual partaking—particularly as we administer the Bread and the Cup in our service: "The Body of the Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for *thee*, preserve *thy* body and soul . . . Christ died for *thee*. . . ." Undoubtedly the Holy Communion is the most individualistic of our services. Here alone is the assurance of personal salvation expressed personally to the individual; here the individual comes, with all the greatness of his personal need expressed in the empty hand he holds out.

It is exactly right that our service should be so arranged as to focus the individual. It is theologically proper that the individual should not be lost, obscured, or overridden. This rests on a twofold ground in Scripture. Firstly, that salvation is an intensely individual experience, and in its inmost reality exclusively individual. However much a man may owe to others, and to the testimony and life of the Church, salvation is a matter between himself and God. No one stood with Paul when Paul stood with Christ on the Damascus Road. It was surely, therefore, a correct perception which led the compilers of the service of Morning Prayer to traverse exactly the ground of individual experience and to make this the expression of communal worship. The community again treads the sacred road of individual experience of God's grace: the knowledge and confession of sin; the assurance of forgiveness; family membership, in the Lord's Prayer; seeking to

learn the will of God in His Word ; expressing personal, and intelligent committal in the Creed ; joining in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. Leaving aside the incredible exactitude of the Prayer Book language to express the emotions and needs of the Christian, it is surely this that has preserved the services in use over the years : their answer to the individual heart.

The second biblical ground for the place of the individual in the communal expression of worship is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. The establishment of this doctrine would take us off course, but even two references to the New Testament (Heb. 10: 19-21 ; 1 Pet. 2: 5-9) are sufficient to show that it is a biblical truth. If this is so, then it is not only spiritually correct to safeguard the individualism of our services, as the preceding paragraph showed, but also doctrinally necessary. If the individual Christian is drowned in the community, or subjected to some system of human priestly mediation, then a fundamental biblical truth is violated.

We must briefly allude to the third biblical focus of common worship : Paul says it must be " to the Lord ". Of old, God commanded His people " to appear before the Lord God " (Ex. 23: 17), and we must be careful to accord supreme place to this biblical stress. The Lord Jesus Christ has pronounced on this aspect of worship, and the passage in which He does so (Mt. 15) will repay closer study than can be given here. Two points, however, stand out : Worship is only acceptable to God when the outward act reflects the inward disposition (15: 8a). Here again the spotlight falls on the individual, his personal life with God, his motives, his sincerity. And, secondly, worship is only acceptable to God when it accords with the teaching of His Word (15: 8b). Our Lord's words are most dramatic ; He does not hesitate to say that if men deviate from the path of God's revealed will for His worship, then their worship is " in vain "—however much sincerity or other virtue it may show. Let it fail to meet God's requirements, and it is all hollow and fruitless. Calvin has summed it up : " True religion must be conformable to the will of God as its unerring standard " (*Inst.*, I, iv, 3).

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It is surely quite clear that a supreme attempt to meet these three biblical desiderata—common worship, individual worship, biblical worship—was made by the framers of our present Book of Common Prayer. Grasping the ideal of the Christian community expressing its common mind, reliving its common experience, offering its common praise and prayer, they took the book from the hand of the priest, and put it into the hand of the worshipper. Equally, they framed a service which demands the intelligent participation of the individual, He is called, not to view an external performance, but to bring himself, in need and in request, as well as in praise and self-offering, to God. And, above all things, our Reformers were consumed by the necessity to give the central place to God, and in consequence they fashioned a service of which more than half consists of selected passages of Holy Scripture. Having observed this, we must, none the less, be careful to observe that the Book of Common Prayer cannot guarantee the actualization of any

of the three biblical aims. In many churches there is no congregational worship, though the book is used ; and no individual response to God ; and no centralizing of God in the midst of His people, though the Word be read and sung. And on the other side, it is only fair to record, what many of us have, no doubt, personally experienced, that in nonconformist churches, where no book is used, and where, sometimes, as with the Brethren, there is not even a minister, yet there is common worship, and individual response, and God glorified. The liturgical principle of worship is not one of the revealed truths of Scripture. It can only be justified pragmatically, and whether, after three hundred years' trial, it can be justified at all is a matter of opinion. Certainly, at the present day, it would be impossible to say that the threefold biblical emphasis outlined in this article is better manifested in the Church of England than in the bookless worship of nonconformist chapel or Brethren assembly. And it is more than strongly arguable that our present condition of lay somnolence and clericalism has been fostered, even encouraged, by the unvarying forms of service.

The conclusion to be drawn from this observation is not, however, that we should consider the abandonment of the ordered liturgy. Indeed, it would be disastrous to do so. The conduct of non-liturgical worship is not everybody's gift, nor is it the same person's gift all the time. Congregations must be guarded from clerical fantasy ; and the clergy must be given positive help in the difficult task of overseeing the worship of God. We walk along an edge here : on the one side there is the chasm of lifeless acquiescence in an ordered form ; on the other side the virtual sacerdotalism of a centralized minister leaning Sunday by Sunday on the singularity of his own wit, and conducting the worship of a puppet congregation dependent on his jerking of the appropriate strings. It would seem clear, however, that in the matter of Prayer Book revision, it must not be forgotten that liturgy is not a fact of revelation, and, specially in these days when questions of union of denominations are in the air, consideration ought to be given to the need to make provision for non-liturgical worship in the Church of England. It is far too readily assumed that some form of liturgy must necessarily be the norm. Bishop Ryle once wrote that " 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 constantly on the stretch . . . they may not even understand him sometimes on account of his language . . . But this could not happen if he prayed from a book ". It is doubtful if this was ever true ; it certainly is not true today. There is nothing in the Bishop's words which could not be alleged against some church which supposedly follows the Book of Common Prayer.

We now turn, in order further to prepare the way for some statement of principle of revision, to ask the question : in the light of these biblical and practical considerations, what purpose must a Prayer Book fulfil ?

It is strangely necessary first to state what purpose a Prayer Book is not designed to fulfil ! Those who are familiar with Reports of Lambeth Conferences, and who have read such documents as *Prayer*

Book Revision in the Church of England, will, no doubt, have noticed the frequent assumption and almost as frequent statement that the Book of Common Prayer stands as the norm of Anglican Doctrine. "Every (Lambeth) Conference has referred to it as holding a cardinal place in the unity of the Anglican Communion, as providing a norm of its worship, and a classical expression of its doctrine" (*Pr. Bk. Revision in the C. of E.*, p. vii). Specifically, Lambeth 1958 spoke of the 1662 Book "as the basic pattern, and indeed, as a bond of unity in doctrine and worship for our Communion as a whole", but urged that "no Prayer Book, not even that of 1662, can be kept unchanged for ever, as a safeguard of established doctrine" (*Report*, 2. 78).

This, of course, is exactly what a manual of worship cannot be. A form of worship is an attempt to apply doctrine to an ideal situation, but to speak of it as, in itself, a statement of doctrine is quite inaccurate. Necessarily, services are constructed on the principle of "charitable assumption", for "we have no right to deprive the true church members of the language which is due to them, and if we apply the language which is due to them, and if we apply the language to any we must apply it to all . . . Thus even the ordinary language of public prayer supposes all the congregation to be true worshippers of God, a supposition which issues in the kind of statement which (is) literal in form, but not intended to be taken literally" (J. B. Mozley: *The Baptismal Controversy*, p. 238). This exact analysis of the category of liturgical language necessarily excludes the Book of Common Prayer, in so far as it is engaged in liturgy, from the realm of dogmatics.

But, as should hardly need saying, the Prayer Book Services were never intended to provide a doctrinal standard. Indeed, Cranmer, all the time he was framing the Book of Common Prayer, and afterwards, was seeking also to hammer into shape that document which does contain the Anglican doctrinal standard, what we call the Thirty-Nine Articles. It is the tragedy of our time that the Church of England has ceased to take the Articles seriously, tolerates a clergy which subscribes to them with tongue in cheek, and, lacking the doctrinal safeguards which they alone provide, nevertheless embarks on liturgical alteration and innovation. Speaking on the 1928 crisis, *Prayer Book Revision in the Church of England* says: "Never was the truth more plainly revealed that our basic difficulty lies in the fact that the Church of England has never made up its mind about the limits of its comprehensiveness". One wonders if, alone of the clergy of our church, the makers of this report never subscribed to the Articles, or never considered what it was they were subscribing. Indeed the Church of England has made up its mind, and that long since! A principle of no small magnitude is involved here.

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A document like the Articles is intended to safeguard the truth which is to be believed by all who wish to belong to the society which professes that document. A liturgical compilation is intended to safeguard devotional practice so that it agrees with the truth. To this end it must contain provisions of two sorts: "rubrics" for the actual ordering of worship, and also directions as to the content of worship or

provision of the content. Both of these matters, and the importance of them, can be illustrated briefly from the liturgical work of Cranmer. In the matter of rubrics, we may take note of his requirements for the position of the minister at the time of the Lord's Supper. In the 1549 book, he was commanded to be "standing humbly afore the midst of the altar", whereas in 1552 the rubric read, "standing at the North-side of the Table". We must note here both that a change was made and also take special note of the precise change which was commanded. The ordering of public worship impinges upon doctrine. From one point of view it can hardly matter where the minister stands, but such simple-mindedness does not accord with life in this world of ours! It so happens that the history of the Church had, and has, attached a significance to the "eastward" position, as being necessarily associated with and appropriate to the doctrine of the "sacrificing" priest and the doctrine of the Lord's Supper as in one sense or another repetitive of Calvary. In the interests of safeguarding doctrine, Cranmer moved the minister away from this source of error.

But Cranmer did not do what might have seemed commonsense—command "westward" position: that is, deny the medieval doctrine of the mass by a complete liturgical contradiction of it, or what might appear to be such a contradiction. He placed the minister at the north side, where alone he is removed, decisively, from the centre of the picture, where he becomes visibly what he is actually, a minister of Christ and the Church, in humble attendance on both. Thus, by a matter of ceremonial order, Cranmer guarded a truth concerning the Church, concerning the ministry, concerning the Lord's Supper, and concerning Christ Himself. When we consider in addition that in 1552 he changed the wording of the "consecration" prayer from "memorial" to "remembrance" we see how also he was eager to protect sound doctrine by the provision of content of the services.

It would be very easy to "idolize" Thomas Cranmer. The Church of England has never, before or since, produced a man so worthy of it! However, when we look back after some centuries acquaintance with his work, while we marvel at its quality, we may be pardoned if in two entirely external matters we question whether he could not have thought a little differently. These are the related questions of uniformity and conformity. Every minister is required to use these services as they are set, and none other; and this practice is to be kingdom-wide. We must at this point ignore the fact that this principle of Cranmer lies about us in ruins today thanks to past clerical illegality and episcopal inactivity. The question to be asked is this: was Cranmer right at this point? Can one invariable service (or largely invariable service) suffice all folk all over the country? And can even those who find themselves in general suited by a particular service avoid the stagnation of familiarity? Lambeth 1958 (2. 80) called for "services easy for the people to follow and therefore with a restrained use of seasonal variations". Surely this is misguided. If one has in mind a service composed with an eye on the occasional visitor then, presumably, such "simplicity" is desirable. But it is impossible to imagine that services for the use of the Church must be composed exclusively for the sake of the lapsed, or the occasional attender. Do those who, from

early childhood, have sung the *Venite* and *Te Deum* Sunday after Sunday, ever realize what they are singing, and what a magnificent hymn the *Te Deum* in fact is? The same is true about all the invariable parts of the services.

We need to remind ourselves again that just as uniformity and conformity are not, stated like that, revealed necessities, so also Scripture does not state or require liturgy as such. This leads to the second question we would ask of the "Cranmerian" position, reverting as we do so to matters earlier touched upon: was there, and is there not a place for providing directions for public worship, but leaving the content to the discretion of the minister. This would be equivalent to recognizing a principle of non-liturgical worship, and clearly doctrinal and ceremonial safeguards would need to be precise to a degree, human nature being what it is; but is it not intrinsically worth considering, and, at this time of inter-church conversations, is not the consideration of it imperative?

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We may now, though in summary fashion, state the principles which have emerged in the course of this inquiry into Prayer Book Revision:

(1) Liturgical revision or composition must rest on a basis of agreed doctrine. Apart from this both the form and content of our services will be determined at best by considerations of "niceness" and "helpfulness" and at worst by "whim" and by that sort of tolerance which a foolish parent extends to a spoilt child. We cannot rewrite church history by refashioning rubrics or framing canons. And, in the realm of ceremonial, this means that there are certain practices—such as the eastward position, eucharistic vestments, and others—which are incompatible with the truth of Scripture. It is surely this same lack of doctrinal foundation which led the framers of the *Report of Baptism and Confirmation* to state that "in the New Testament Adult Baptism is the norm, and it is only in the light of this fact that the doctrine and practice of Baptism can be understood" (p. x). This cannot have been the view of the Anglican Reformers, and it is not the view which reasonably arises from a view of Scripture. While the Church of England remains in its present state of doctrinal confusion, it is no time for liturgical revision at all. There must be a basis of agreed doctrine. We have only one such legal basis, the Thirty-Nine Articles.

(2) Worship must be so ordered and expressed as to guarantee the primacy and centrality of God, dwelling in the midst of His people. Traditionally in our church the attempt has been made to secure this by insisting on the consecutive and uninterrupted reading of Scripture as the centre-piece of the service, and by extensive use of scriptural phrasing and exclusive use of scriptural doctrine in the prayers and other devotional exercises. There is surely no need to alter this. But, here also, watchfulness is necessary, and we are faced again with a doctrinal consideration. Cranmer fashioned a Service of Holy Communion which brilliantly guarded and expressed the initiative and sole activity of God as the Saviour of His people. God contributes all and they nothing. But what of the so-called "people's offering" now

advocated? Are we to understand that after all man is in some sort a contributor in the matter of salvation? If he is, then Scripture is wrong on the point; if he is not, why seek a ceremony to suggest that he is? And this is a point where not only the truth of Scripture and the central doctrine of our personal faith but also the honour of God our Saviour are at stake!

(3) The provision for a "whole" Christian worship. We noted above that the abiding quality in the services of Morning and Evening Prayer was partly explained by the way in which they "answer" to individual experience and need. They set out, as the Exhortation reminds us, to provide for confession, thanksgiving, praise, hearing of God's Word, and intercession. We noted that incidentally they also provide assurance, and dedication. The order in which they make their provision is the order of experience. This is correct and should be retained.

(4) Services, even though they require variable and alternative sections, should be fashioned in the interests of simplicity and intelligibility. The Gospel itself is simple; the apostle insists that there is a "simplicity" in Christ which we abandon only at peril (2 Cor. 11: 3). This should be reflected outwardly in our service. We permit the ornate and the complicated with the same results as followed from Gideon's golden ephod (Jg. 8: 27). Cranmer found a church in which ceremonies were so increased "that the burden of them was intolerable"; he left us a church of simplicity and directness. Surely also in this he was right. Do we therefore need the "candle" ceremony in Baptism, and other such things? The principle of intelligibility extends, obviously, to wording and phraseology, and we would need someone to do for our day what Cranmer did so outstandingly for his.

(5) The services must be congregational in character. This was excellently expressed by Lambeth 1958: "Wholly *common* prayer, avoiding official private prayers of the celebrant while the people are otherwise engaged; avoiding prayer which cannot be heard by the congregation, and providing for the audible response of the congregation, and for communicants at every celebration" (2. 80).

Prayer Book revision is a matter of the gravest importance. Should it take a wrong turning, our worship will become "vain" and fail of its purpose. The study and deep interest of the whole Church is required for a matter of this seriousness, and above all earnest, continuing, prevailing prayer, that the Father, who seeks such to worship Him, may fashion our church into a unity of individuals worshipping in Spirit and Truth.