Editorial

AS this year brings us to the tercentenary of the 1662 edition of the Book of Common Prayer at a time when there is much talk about Prayer Book revision, it affords a suitable moment for considering the significance of our Book of Common Prayer in its historical setting. The articles of this issue are designed to be relevant to this occasion. In taking stock of the present situation we should bear in mind, in the first place, that the book of 1662 is not radically different from that of 1552—in other words, that it is essentially a document of the Reformation, with Archbishop Cranmer as its chief architect. The principles by which Cranmer and his fellow Reformers were governed are set out in the two treatises, entitled *Concerning the Service of the Church* and *Of Ceremonies*, which are prefixed to the book of Common Prayer and are attributed to the pen of Cranmer himself. First and foremost, the great foundation, upon which all else must stand, is that of Holy Scripture. This principle of principles, that " it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's Word written " (Article 20), is the master-key to the understanding of the work of the Reformers in the construction of the English Prayer Book. Accordingly, the intention is expressed of returning, through the daily reading from the Old and New Testaments at Morning and Evening Prayer, to the practice of the early Church whereby the people heard the whole Bible read over once every year in public worship. Coupled with this is the regular preaching of the pure Word of God—preaching having been in the apostolic Church of the New Testament God's primary instrument of salvation—and the due administration of the sacraments, which, as visible expositions of the promises of the Gospel, are properly an aspect or mode of the ministry of the Word (cf. Article 19).

In the next place, we find that there is a thorough respect for the scriptural catholicity of the ancient Church and a desire to reinstate the purer order of earlier times after centuries of corruption and deterioration. The Reformers did not, in fact, regard themselves as innovators, but as restorers : their aim was to *re*form what during the intervening generations had become *de*formed. It was not without reason that they charged, or countercharged, and demonstrated by copious quotations from the patristic authors, that the papists were the real innovators, since they had imported into the worship of the Church a mass of rites, teachings, and traditions, unknown in the early centuries, which had virtually obscured the Gospel from view. These importations were both unscriptural and uncatholic, and therefore they had to be abandoned. But, in addition to this, the services of the Church had become encumbered and complicated with such a multiplicity of ceremonial regulations that an insupportable burden had been imposed on the people. This was something that called for simplification, to the

end that the rules and requirements of the Church might be as few and as plain as was compatible with the decent ordering of public worship. There is something essentially simple about genuine Christian worship. But it is simplicity allied to orderliness ; for God is a God of order, and the Reformers realized that the true end of worship is to glorify God.

Another important principle of the liturgical reform of the sixteenth century was that the services should be intelligible to the people. St. Paul emphasizes the necessity of worshipping with the understanding. But this was impossible when the services were conducted, as they had been for centuries, in Latin—a language which the ordinary people had long since ceased to understand. And worship that is without understanding inevitably falls away into superstition. Thus the Reformers set themselves to give us a Prayer Book in English, which would be comprehensible to all. And, linked with this—for previously those who attended church had been little better than spectators, while in distant isolation the priest said and did they knew not what—they constructed forms of service which were truly congregational, so that clergy and people together could participate unitedly in the worship of Almighty God.

Today we tend to esteem our Prayer Book much too lightly. We are told that its language is too archaic and its liturgy not archaic enough. We leave out of account the testimony of Strype concerning Cranmer, that " there was no book, either of the ancient or modern writers, especially upon the point of the eucharist, which he had not noted with his own hand in the most remarkable places ; no councils, canons, decrees of popes, which he had not read and well considered ". We are in danger of forgetting that the Book of Common Prayer is a veritable treasury of scriptural catholicity. And, in these days when art and literature in general reflect the lostness and the perverted aimlessness of so much of our living, we might with advantage ponder that the English of Cranmer in the Prayer Book and of Tyndale in the Bible has, in the past, ennobled not only our language but also our national character.

We should also, as we celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of 1662, give due weight to the significant fact that for a hundred years prior to that date the Book of Common Prayer had been the focus of religious unity in England, and would, no doubt, have continued to be so had it not been for the disastrous proviso in the Act of Uniformity which precipitated the country into ecclesiastical disruption. Even so the Prayer Book continued to be the unitive axis at the heart of the Church of England until the rise of Tractarianism in the nineteenth century. The reason why it held over so long a period the loyalties of churchmen of many varieties of outlook and emphasis was because there existed an over-all agreement in the doctrines and worship of which it was the vehicle. Arguments and dissatisfactions there were, indeed, prior to 1662, and over numerous matters, but as these were of peripheral and not central significance they did not have the effect of disrupting the Church. Thus, to take two examples, in the latter part of the sixteenth century Cartwight, in his dispute with Whitgift, repudiated with horror any suggestion that he and those who thought like him might be guilty of tendencies to anabaptist sectarianism ; and

in the next century we find the Puritan divine Richard Sibbes expressing his contentment in the following words : " We are to praise God for the liberty of the Church at this time, that we have the Word of God to rule our consciences, and that other matters are not pressed on us but as matters of decency and order ".

As the Preface of 1662 shows, the Book of Common Prayer is not a party book, but on the contrary a book which has united English people in Christian worship for generations. We may say, indeed, that it is the veritable embodiment, as it were, of the true Anglican *via media*—the middle way which is walled in from the errors of Rome on the one hand and from the sectarian excesses of anabaptism on the other. The revision of 1662 was, however, in no sense a radical revision, for the simple reason that the revisers were in full accord with the teaching and liturgy of the existing (1552) Prayer Book. " We are fully persuaded in our judgments (and we profess it to the world)," they testify, " that the Book, as it stood before established by law, doth not contain in it anything contrary to the Word of God, or to sound doctrine, or which a godly man may not with a good conscience use and submit unto ". The alterations they introduced were, accordingly, of no more than secondary significance, involving modernization of the language where necessary, improvement of the rubrical and calendrical directions, the use of the most recent authorized translation of the Bible (that of 1611) in public worship, and the addition of certain prayers, thanksgivings, and services suited to special occasions.

Any revision today should, we would urge, be along these same lines. Let us emulate the wisdom of our Anglican forebears of three hundred years ago and leave the Book of Common Prayer intact so far as its essential structure of doctrine and worship is concerned. If alternative forms of service are authorized, it should not be with a view to accommodating irreconcilable oppositions of doctrine within the Church of England—which would be only to canonize confusion—but for the purpose of increasing the liturgical flexibility of our Church without doctrinal compromise. Departures from the doctrines and forms prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer have already weakened the Church beyond measure, not only because they have destroyed the unity in essentials which the Prayer Book was designed to preserve, but also because they have had the effect of driving from the Church of England great numbers of excellent people who have been dismayed and exasperated at finding strange services and teachings, not from the Prayer Book, introduced into their parish churches. Can it be denied that there is a longing on the part of the laity to be able to worship in their parish churches with the full participation which the loyal use of the Prayer Book ensures ? Indeed, as Archbishop Lord Fisher said not long ago, " every member of the Church has *a right* to find the appointed liturgical words and rubrics observed wherever he goes ".

Can we not today recapture the vision of the Book of Common Prayer as once again the focal point of religious unity in England, reassembling, as far as may be possible, the ecclesiastical fragments which have resulted from the breakages of the past three hundred years to form once more a truly *national* church, flexible in matters of secondary significance, but united in loyalty to the scriptural and

catholic doctrine and worship of what would once more be the Prayer Book of all? Could not this be one major road to the revival of spiritual religion in England?

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A new feature in this issue is the supplement apportioned to the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion. It is intended that this should become a regular feature and that all members of this recently formed Fellowship should be recipients of *The Churchman*, by virtue of an inclusive subscription. Information concerning the nature, aims, and plans of the Fellowship will be found in this supplement. We are very happy to have this association and pray that this Fellowship may be blessed of God for the advancement of Christ's cause in the Anglican Communion.

P.E.H.