

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# The Use of the Prayer Book To-day

BY THE REV. D. R. VICARY, M.A. B.Sc.

THE Preface to the 1549 Book of Common Prayer contained these words: "Furthermore, by this ordre, the curates shal nede none other bookes for their publike seruice, but this boke and the Bible." This sums up Cranmer's achievement from the point of view of providing the Church with a service book both cheap to buy and easy to handle. Hitherto, there had been various diocesan Uses and the books required for the worship of the Church—Missals, Manuals, Breviaries, Pontificals, Processionals, and many others—were costly and cumbersome. Cranmer's book was for clergy and laity alike. It was accessible to the laity in a way that the former books were not. Thus 1549 saw a revolution in worship: the new book embodied the insights of the Reformation in its congregational character, its conception of ministry and its doctrine of the Communion. In its simplicity, it was a practical proposition. The late Dr. Swete commented in 1896: "The Prayer Book is as much the layman's companion as the priest's, and it has largely taken the place of private manuals of devotion, whilst in church it is in the hands of the whole congregation. Something has doubtless been sacrificed to brevity, the result has been to secure for the Church of England the most popular Service-book in Christendom." In 1949 the position is more complex. We are well aware of our heritage in the Book of Common Prayer. It is standing the test of time, even of these times. As the Lambeth Bishops pointed out in 1948, it is the link which binds Anglicans the world over. But in addition to this, we must take account of the varieties of Use within the whole Anglican Communion, and of experiments to meet new demands at home.

## I

We cannot speak of the use of the Prayer Book to-day in a vacuum. Therefore let us examine the situation in those parish churches where there is a live worshipping community. In the first place, we find that Cranmer's principle of "one book and the Bible" has gone. There are now diocesan service books as well. In addition to the piles of Prayer Books at the end of the Church will be found a number of hymn-books. Even in village churches can be seen communicants using little manuals of devotion, and a visit to the Youth Club during the week might reveal a pile of 1928 Complines. All these things may be seen in parishes which cannot be called "extreme": in many cases, though by no means all, they represent the outcropping of the worship which is fostered by the Prayer Book.

One approach to this problem of deviations from the Prayer Book use is the purely legal one. The Book of Common Prayer is annexed to the Act of Uniformity. Certain changes were permitted by the Act of Uniformity Amendment Act of 1872, but in general it is safe to say that the majority of Anglican Churches do exercise liberty in details of conformity to the Prayer Book. The legal approach is fraught with many embarrassments when it comes to Christian worship.

If worship is a living force, then new thought, new problems are bound to leave their mark. Further, nobody seems to know what "lawful authority" in these matters really means. In 1906 a Royal Commission reported that the present law of public worship "is too narrow for this generation", and ever since the legalists have been standing on the wrong leg. The Church, we hope, is alive and worship must go on. New life cannot await the administrative delays. We must look elsewhere for our guiding principles in the use of the Prayer Book to-day.

At the other extreme, we find those who uphold Custom as the guiding principle, with the restraining influence of the *jus liturgicum* of the Bishops. This position was upheld by the Tractarians and has recently been entertainingly expounded by Dom Gregory Dix in *The Shape of the Liturgy*. But while it is true that custom does affect the development of the forms of worship, it is by no means the primary consideration. Indeed, the very existence of our Prayer Book is a denial of this position, for it was born under the influence of reform, and was moulded in the light of new truth. We cannot separate doctrine from worship. In the course of time they interact. This consideration does lead to a principle which may be applied to the use of the Prayer Book. We may recognise, on the one hand, the doctrine which the Prayer Book liturgy and Offices are meant to serve. On the other hand, we may admit that the actual forms of worship need revision in the light of new needs. The constitutional problem of actual revision is beyond the scope of this article, but at any rate it may be observed that it will not be solved merely by disestablishment; it will remain for the Church of England to decide when its Bishops are acting constitutionally and to give to the laity a voice in the affairs of the Church which traditionally has been exercised through Parliament.

It is in the light of the principle of faithfulness to the intentions of the Anglican Fathers expressed in the Prayer Book that we can best judge the value of services put out to meet new needs. Some of these compilations are commendable, as, for example, some of the Litanies in the Oxford Diocesan Service Book, the Bishop of Rochester's Diocesan Litany for Rogationtide, and the service of Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child in use in the Diocese of Sheffield. The point, however, is reached where such new efforts are likely to detract from the familiarity of the average churchman with his Prayer Book services. The only influence which can stem this tide is that of faithful use and regular instruction. This Prayer Book year is witnessing a real recovery of our heritage in the Book of Common Prayer. A similar consideration arises in the use of hymns. It is undoubtedly one of the deficiencies of the English Reformation that it was not accompanied by an outburst of hymnody such as was the glory of Luther's work. But this came later. All schools of thought have contributed to the Anglican heritage of hymnody during the four hundred years of the Prayer Book's life. Again the point is reached where the use of hymns disturbs and even destroys the liturgical pattern of the Prayer Book service: and again, the only remedy is a careful observance of the priority of the Prayer Book.

## II

Three principles emerge as we try to interpret the spirit of the Prayer Book and understand its use to-day; the relation of worship to doctrine, a pattern of worship and a pastoral ministry. We have already observed that the Prayer Book took shape under the influence of reform. There is continuity with the past in sources and partly in spirit, but the whole was undertaken to provide a means of worship consistent with true doctrine. It is no accident that the Thirty-nine Articles are printed with the Prayer Book. Sanderson's Preface of 1662 sums up the spirit of the Prayer Book compilers: "We are fully persuaded in our judgments (and we here profess it to the world) that the Book, as it stood before established by Law, doth not contain in it any thing contrary to the Word of God, or to sound Doctrine . . ." A clear example of the relation of doctrine to worship is seen in the placing of the Prayer of Oblation after the Communion. It expresses the fact that we cannot offer ourselves until we have received the grace which unites us to Christ—a sequence which is based on justification by faith. Dom Gregory Dix has justly observed that Cranmer's service is a piece of liturgical craftsmanship in the first rank—"once its intention is understood". And beneath most of the objection to Cranmer's Communion Service there lies the dislike of the doctrine. The relation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone to the structure of the Eucharist needs further discussion, for the Church of Scotland, with justification by faith well to the fore in its Westminster Confession, has a Communion Service with Oblation before Communion. Whatever the outcome of such discussion, the important issue is that we are treating liturgy as subject to the Word of God in the spirit of Article XXXIV.

The second basic principle in the Prayer Book is its pattern of worship. With Morning and Evening Prayer as a daily office, based on a lectionary and Psalter, and the Holy Communion as the centre of the Church's worship on Sundays, we have a pattern which has a genuine claim to primitive character. The place of the Communion is being brought home to-day by those parishes which have a Family Communion regularly as the major service. The time will vary with the place, and the frequency with the tradition; the important point is that such worship is not an addition or an accessory to what has already been done in Church, and it is not the preserve of individual piety—these are the main difficulties of the 8.0 a.m. and midday celebrations. It is sometimes urged that Mattins is a preparation for Communion. So it was, in the intention of the Prayer Book compilers: but they also intended that everyone would stay. Today, such a use of Mattins is purely a matter of individual piety, for how can there be a climax of worship of the whole gathered people of God, when most of them have left the building by Communion time? We need to recover the Communion of the whole congregation.

The daily office of Morning and Evening Prayer is designed for the clergy, but a church gains in its sense of the priority of worship if the staff of the parish meet in church for the service. There is much to be said for encouraging various groups in the parish who have devo-

tional epilogues, and what-not, to join in Evensong—an office which they know the Vicar would be saying in any case. The bigger problem is the use of Morning and Evening Prayer on Sundays. These services are undoubtedly magnificently suited to congregational use with hymns and a sermon. Evelyn Underhill regards them as well suited to the “temper of the English mind”. But if we are considering the use of the Prayer Book to-day, then we must emphasise that hymns and sermon ought not to detract from the liturgical pattern. It is a searching test of our worship to find out what people come to church for; and if they come only for bright hymns or the sermon, then we have not done justice to the Prayer Book. Judging by the best attended services of this kind, it would seem that they depend on a deep conviction of the ministry of the Word. This unites the biblical heart of the service with the sermon at the end. Where there is this emphasis, it is clear that there is little need to alter or “modernise” the service. With imagination in the arrangement of the length of psalms and lessons, the service moves naturally and rhythmically. A further reason for the true esteem of the Prayer Book service is the family sense which may be engendered in the intercessions. The effectiveness of this worship depends in these days also on the factor of length: it is possible, and indeed wise, to plan a service of not much more than an hour, leaving fifteen minutes for a sermon. The lasting teaching value of such a service also comes from the unity that exists between the various parts. So, for example, the opening sentence can be taken from a lesson and later be the text of the sermon. In this way worship and instruction are interwoven.

In all these ways the Prayer Book can be used to-day as effectively as ever. But there is growing up a large body of people to whom the service is incomprehensible. There is no background of habit or familiarity with the language of the Prayer Book. For such there must be provided on the one hand a means of worship at their level, simple and biblical in character, and also a means of instruction in worship, so that they may enter the Prayer Book heritage. Such a use of the Catechumenate as envisaged in Canon Ireson's book *Church Worship and the Non-Church-Goer* is well worth parochial experiment. It is a valuable characteristic of that book that the Prayer Book is upheld as of supreme value, both in dignity and theology.

The problem of the language of the Prayer Book is a real difficulty for most people. In the first Preface in 1549 Cranmer observes that St. Paul “would have such language spoken to the people in the Church, as they might understand, and profit by hearing the same”, and for many that cannot be said for the Prayer Book to-day. Likewise, Sanderson's 1662 Preface states that some alterations were made “for the more proper expressing of some words or phrases of ancient usage in terms more suitable to the language of the present times, and the clearer explanation of some other words or phrases that were either of doubtful significance, or otherwise liable to misconstruction”. Many are asking why such a process cannot go on. Even if we grant that the Prayer Book is a treasure of the English language, those who stand by it are really identical in spirit with those who preferred Latin at the Reformation! But the problem is not only one of translation.

There is the problem of conserving the theological depth which belonged to the old usage. It has been suggested that a group of distinguished writers who are themselves soaked in the Prayer Book liturgy and at the same time have a gift for "putting across" the gospel to the modern world in its own idiom, should put into their own words the service of Holy Communion. Great devotional profit might ensue, and also a new appreciation of the beauty of the Prayer Book. But when all is said and done, the greatest opponents of the Prayer Book words are not those who really do not understand but those who do not believe what the Prayer Book stands for. Genuine Christian experience finds its home in the language of the Christian centuries.

### III

The third principle of the Prayer Book use is the pastoral ministry. This shines out of the teaching on confession and the forms of absolution. The Ordinal makes it plain. But in this respect the actual use of the Prayer Book to-day is by no means clear. The Prayer Book very properly provides offices for Baptism, Catechism, Confirmation, Marriage, Churching, Burial, and for the Communion and Visitation of the sick. In so many cases there are revised forms which have become more popular. It is probably true that most men who passed through Wycliffe or Ridley in the 1930's left their Theological College with the impression that the 1928 Occasional Offices were to be preferred in most cases. The other day a parish priest told the writer of an enquirer who came for instruction. He was given a Prayer Book, as the Church's own book of order, but with the proviso that he probably would not hear the Baptism, Burial or Marriage services, and a warning that the Bishop would not be using that form of Confirmation service! This is undoubtedly the weakest part of the use of the Prayer Book to-day. There is ample ground for new revision, for there are signs that the vogue for the 1928 offices is passing.

While the forms of service in which the pastoral care of souls is exercised are subject to criticism, the Prayer Book ideal stands firm. There is no finer exposition of the Christian Ministry than the Bishop's charge at the Ordination of Priests: "to be Messengers, Watchmen, and Stewards of the Lord; to teach, and to premonish, to feed and provide for the Lord's family; to seek for Christ's sheep that are dispersed abroad, and for his children who are in the midst of this naughty world, that they may be saved through Christ for ever." It is in the spirit of this ideal that the use of the Prayer Book to-day has its real power. In faithfulness to true doctrine in the light of the New Testament, in a consistent and balanced diet of regular worship, the work of the pastor gains its strength in such a framework. The care of souls and their needs are more important than rigid uniformity, yet it is the experience of many that the use of the Prayer Book is a spiritual help in the manifold work of the ministry to-day—a help which stands the test of time and which increases with use.