

3. Book of Common Prayer (BCP)

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1. Introduction

In the constitutions of most Anglican churches the Book of Common¹ Prayer (BCP) (1662) has an important place in describing the standard of Anglican theology and worship. So a typical Constitution of an Anglican Diocese will say that the Diocese accepts the interpretations of the beliefs and practices of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church which are indicated in the BCP and the 39 Articles of Religion. This means that the principles of theology, worship and church order which are embodied in the Prayer Book are an authority for Anglicans.

2. Principles of Worship

Archbishop Cranmer (1448-1556) and others who helped produce the Prayer Book followed a number of principles when they revised the Services for the Church of England. Some of these principles were:

¹ Meaning “public” as opposed to private.

a) Biblical and Edifying

When Cranmer and others revised the liturgy, they wanted it to edify (to instruct or improve) the people, to be easy to understand and to be biblical. In the Preface to the BCP we read:

“Our general aim therefore in this undertaking was, not to gratify this or that party, in any of their unreasonable demands; but to do that, which to our best understanding, we conceived might most tend to peace and unity in the Church; the procuring of reverence, and exciting of piety and devotion in the public worship of God.”

In the Introduction to the Prayer Book called *Concerning the Service of the Church*, the authors remind us that the early liturgies purposed that

“the whole Bible (or the greatest part of it) should be read over once every year; intending thereby, that the clergy, and especially those who were ministers in the congregation, should (by often reading and meditation in God’s word) be stirred up to godliness themselves, and be more able to exhort others by wholesome doctrine and refute those who were adversaries to the truth; and further that the people (by daily hearing of holy Scripture read in the Church) might continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God, and be inflamed with love of his true religion.”

The Prayer Book which was produced by the reformers followed these principles. The Introduction *Concerning the Service of the Church* claims that the BCP is profitable because:

“nothing is ordained to be read, but the very pure Word of God, the holy Scriptures, or that which is agreeable to the same, and that in such a language and order as is most easy and plain for the understanding both of the readers and hearers.”

The services of the Anglican Church are said to be consistent with the scriptures. The Preface to the BCP says:

“it does not contain in it any thing contrary to the Word of God, or to sound Doctrine, or which a godly man may not with a good conscience use and submit to”

The Prayer for the Second Sunday in Advent

Blessed Lord
who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them
that by patience, and the comfort of your holy Word,
we may embrace and always hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The BCP expressed a reformed theology. For example, the Communion service expressed the belief that the body of Christ was eaten only by faith, because it was not physically present. The last rubric in the Holy Communion Service says,

“For the sacramental bread and wine remain still in their very natural substances, and therefore may not be adored; (for that would be idolatry, to be abhorred by all faithful Christians;) and the natural Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ are in heaven, and not here; it being against the truth of Christ’s natural body to be at one time in more places than one.”

See also Article 28 of the *39 Articles of Religion*.

The general theology underlying the Prayer Book was the theology of the Reformation especially justification by faith.

Article 11 says,

"We are accounted righteous before God, only because of the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith, and not because of our own works or because of what we deserve. So the doctrine, that we are justified by faith only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and full of comfort, as is expressed more fully in the Homily of Justification."

b) Common Language

The services of the church should be in a language which can be understood by the ordinary people.

This was not the case in England at the time of the Reformation. The Introduction *Concerning the Service of the Church* says,

“And moreover, whereas Saint Paul would have such language spoken to the people in the Church, as they might understand, and have profit by hearing the

same; the service in the Church of England these many years has been read in Latin to the people, which they understand not; so that they have heard with their ears only, and their heart, spirit, and mind, have not been edified thereby.”

The Introduction goes on to say that the service should be “in such a language and order as is most easy and plain for the understanding both of the readers and the hearers.”

Article 24 says,

"It is clearly contrary to the word of God and to the custom of the ancient church to have public prayer in the church, or to minister the sacraments, in a language which the people do not understand."

c) Common Prayer

The services of the church are public services for the whole church to take part in. Before the Reformation many different forms of service were used in different places.

Concerning the Service of the Church says,

“Whereas up till now there has been great diversity in saying and singing in Churches within this Realm; some following Salisbury use, some of Hereford use,...; now from henceforth all the whole Realm shall have but one use.”

This is why until the 20th century all Anglicans in every place around the world used the same liturgy. The Services were meant for public prayer for the whole people together. The prayers in the services were prayers which all could understand and all could say Amen to. They were the prayers of the whole Church not the private prayers of individuals.

d) By Authority

The services of the church are not the responsibility of private individuals. Rather those with authority in the church should decide what is a suitable service. This is how true teaching can be protected. The section called *About Ceremonies* in the BCP says,

“no one ought to take responsibility for, nor presume to appoint or alter any public or common Order in Christ's Church, unless he is lawfully called and authorized to do so.”

e) Ceremonies which are not Dumb or Dark

The reformers removed from the services of the church ceremonies that were “dark”. That is that taught things that were wrong. They also removed ceremonies that were “dumb”, that is that did not teach anything or were too difficult to understand. *About Ceremonies* says that the Prayer Book services are “neither dark nor dumb ceremonies, but are set forth, so that everyone can understand what they mean, and what use they serve.”

f) Reading the Bible

The reformers wanted the Bible to be read in church so they designed a calendar of readings so that in Morning and Evening Prayer the whole Old Testament was read in a year and the New Testament twice. They also designed the readings so that the books of the Bible were read through without being interrupted. Before this time the reading of the Bible in Church was not consistent (like some modern lectionaries). *Concerning the Service of the Church* says:

“commonly when any book of the Bible was begun, after three or four chapters were read out, all the rest were unread. And in this way the book of Isaiah was begun in Advent, and the book of Genesis in Septuagesima; but they were only begun, and never read through; in a similar way were other books of holy Scripture used.”

Concerning the Service of the Church goes on to explain what the new Prayer Book provided.

“And ... here is drawn out a Calendar..., which is plain and easy to understand; in which the reading of holy Scripture is so set forth (arranged), that all things shall be done in order, without breaking one piece from another.”

g) Appropriate to each Nation

Article 34 says,

“It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies are the same in every place. They have always been different. They may be changed for different countries, times, and cultures, as long as nothing is ordained against God's Word. ...

Every national Church has authority to ordain, change, and abolish, ceremonies of the Church which are ordained only by human authority, so that everything results in edifying.”

The Introduction called *Of Ceremonies*, states that,

“we think it convenient that every country should use such Ceremonies which they shall think best to the setting forth of God’s honour and glory, and to the bringing of the people to a most perfect and godly living, without error or superstition; and that they should put away other things, which from time to time they perceive to be most abused, as often happens with human ordinances in different ways in different countries.”

3. The Book of Common Prayer Itself (1662)

The Reformers placed all the ceremonies of the church in one Book so that everyone could use it in every place. They did not allow other services to be used. One reason they did this was to maintain *purity of doctrine and practice*. The Prayer Book also became an important means of teaching the people true doctrine. One of the reasons the Anglican Church has been strong theologically is that it has a liturgy that is strong theologically. It also has a liturgy that all Anglicans have learnt. So the church has had a common theological tradition. When the Prayer Book was first produced most people would not have been able to read nor would they have had a copy to read if they could. So they heard it read and remembered the words.

a) Modern Revisions of the Liturgy

The **liturgy** is the words and ceremonies which the church uses to conduct its services. There has been many revision to the liturgies in the last 40 years. Some of these changes have been good. Now there are many English versions of the services, such as the *Alternative Services Book* of 1980 and the *Book of Common Worship* (2000) published by the Church of England, or *An Australian Prayer Book* (1978), and *A Prayer Book for Australia* (1995). Each national church has revised its liturgy, and in each Diocese the Bishop has authorised the liturgy for that Diocese.

b) The structure of Prayer Book Services

Most of the services in the BCP were revisions of earlier services. When Thomas Cranmer and others revised them they arranged them according to a theological understanding of the nature and purpose of the service.

For example the Service for the Burial of the Dead of 1552 omitted many things from the earlier services (including the Mass) and made many changes to the order. The reason for the changes was so that the focus was no longer on the dead person and their passage through purgatory. Instead the service was meant to give comfort to the living. The service was a wonderful expression of confidence in the resurrection, and the direct passing of the dead person into the presence of the Lord. It gave expression to the belief in salvation by grace through the death of Jesus and the rejection of the idea of purgatory.

i) The Service of Holy Communion

Many changes were made by the Reformers to the old Mass services. The Prayer Book of 1552 made further changes to the Book of 1549 (from Edward VI's time), bringing it into greater conformity with the theology of the Reformation. [For example, the later book excluded the mass vestments and prayers to the dead.] When Elizabeth came to the Throne in 1559 she restored the 1552 Book with only one change to the Communion service, which was to add the words of administration from 1549 to the words of 1552. The 1662 service was the same as 1552 with a number of small changes. It first appeared in 1662, two years after The Restoration of the Monarchy (Charles II) to great controversy because it allowed the wearing of vestments which were seen as popish by Presbyterians and Independents who resigned their livings en masse. The wearing of such garments had been allowed in the original Prayer Book of 1549 and then withdrawn in 1552 so their reintroduction could be seen as highly provocative coming as it did after a period when the Presbyterians had been in the ascendancy during the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell.

The Communion Service of the Book of Common Prayer is carefully structured. It begins with the Lord's Prayer as the earlier services did. It omits the private preparation of the priest and calls the people immediately to ask for their hearts to be cleansed in the words of the opening collect. The Commandments are read to assist this cleansing, followed by a prayer for the Sovereign.

This preparatory section then leads to the ministry of the Word. A collect (prayer) for the day is said, and readings from the Epistles and Gospels are each read, followed by the Nicene Creed. On the basis of these statements of biblical truth the sermon then follows.

After the sermon, the people are encouraged to give to the poor and offer other gifts as well. After this Offertory the minister places bread and wine on the holy Table and prays for the church throughout the world.

The Communion is preceded by a number of exhortations. Two of these are to encourage people to prepare to receive Communion on a future day. The third encourages those present to examine themselves and to come to receive the sacrament in repentance and with faith.

The people then join in a Confession of sin and the minister speaks the Absolution to them, followed by a number of sentences from scripture which are meant to assure them of God's forgiveness. The Confession is placed after the congregation has heard the scriptures and before they come to receive the sacrament.

The people have prepared themselves by examination and confession, and have heard that they are forgiven, so the minister leads them in a great prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

ii) The Prayer of "Humble Access"

This prayer is prayed by the people before they come to the Lord's Table to receive the bread and wine.

"We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ and to drink his blood that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us. Amen."

This is followed by the Prayer of Consecration. This prayer states that Christ's death was the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world; that Christ commanded us to continue a memory of his death; and asks that as we eat the bread and drink the wine, in remembrance of his death and suffering, we may share in his body and blood.

After the Prayer of Consecration the minister and then the people receive the bread and wine.

The service concludes with the Lord's Prayer, a prayer of thanksgiving, the hymn of praise known as the *Gloria*, and finally the blessing.

iii) The Importance of Scripture

The service depends a great deal on scripture.² The beginning of the service prepares the people to hear the scripture and receive the sacrament. After hearing the Word of God they are then ready to confess their sins in preparation for receiving the bread and wine. The bread and wine are received as signs which bring the promise of forgiveness because they remind us of Christ's death for us. The service concludes with great praise and thanksgiving, because by then the written, spoken and visible (sacramental) word of God has stirred up our hearts to this praise. By contrast many modern services try to stir up our hearts initially with singing etc., without reminding us of the basis for praise, ie, the grace of God revealed in Christ.

The Services of Morning and Evening Prayer

The services of Morning and Evening Prayer were adapted by the Reformers from a number of services which were used by priests and monks in the Middle Ages. Morning Prayer replaced Matins (said before daybreak) Lauds (at daybreak) and Prime (soon after dawn).

Morning Prayer begins with an exhortation to confess our sins followed by a prayer of Absolution. The exhortation includes a clear summary of the purposes for meeting together as God's people, ie,

- to give thanks for the benefits we have received from God;
- to declare his praise;
- to hear his holy Word; and
- to ask for those things that we need.

² One thing that is most striking for all those who come from outside the Anglican Church – it was for me from a non-conformist background– is the focus upon the scriptures in the first Anglican service I can distinctively remember being present at. When one picks up a BCP one finds 15 pages given to outlining how the scripture readings were set out for Morning and Evening Prayer, Sundays, and other Holy Days throughout the year.

The Lord's Prayer leads into a time of praise using Psalm 95 followed by readings of other psalms according to the lectionary. The reading from the Old Testament is also followed by a response of praise using the words of the ancient hymn called the *Te Deum*, or another hymn from the apocrypha. The reading from the New Testament is also followed by praise using the Song of Zechariah (Luke 1.68), or Psalm 100. This ministry of the Word is concluded by saying the Apostles' Creed.

A second use of the Lord's Prayer introduces the prayers. The first of these prayers is a set of responsive prayers in which the minister says one line and the people respond with another. This allowed the people to join in even though they did not have a Prayer Book to read.

The service of Evening Prayer has a similar structure.

No sermon was provided at Morning and Evening Prayer because they were daily services. The daily reading of the scriptures was meant to be the way people were built up in their faith.

On Sundays it seems that the Holy Communion service was meant to follow Morning Prayer, and at this service a sermon is required. If there was no Communion, the service ended at the prayer for the church.

Intercessions in the Book of Common Prayer

The Prayers at Morning and Evening Prayer include prayers for the government and the church leaders. There is also a strong emphasis on asking God for peace, protection and defence against those who oppose us. This perhaps reflected the dangers of the time.

The prayer for the Church at Holy Communion includes prayer for unity and agreement in the truth of God's holy word; that the government will truly and impartially administer justice; that church leaders will teach God's true and living word and rightly administer the sacraments; that the congregation will hear and receive God's word; and for those in need or sickness. The prayer concludes by thanking God for those who have died and asking for grace to follow their good example and so, with them, share in God's kingdom.

4. The Church Calendar and Lectionary

The Church **Calendar** lists the important days in the Church's year. The Anglican Church observes special days such as Christmas and Easter and other days connected with the ministry of Jesus. The structure of the church year approximately follows the life and ministry of Jesus.

Advent – Christmas – Epiphany – Lent – Palm Sunday - Good Friday – Easter – Ascension – Pentecost – and then Trinity.

Saints' Days are also observed. At the Reformation many saints' days were removed from the Calendar. The ones who remained included significant people from the Bible, such as the Apostles, some of the early church Fathers, some English saints and others. In our modern Calendars, other famous Christians are also remembered.

The **Lectionary** is a calendar of readings for all the services of the church during the year. The lectionary used in the Diocese of Singapore is based on a Common Lectionary which is used by Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican and many other churches. The lectionary provides readings for three services on Sundays and two services each other day. It follows a three-year cycle. That is, it takes three years to read through all the readings.

5. The Liturgical Colours and Vestments

The major seasons of the church year are observed in many Anglican churches by the use of coloured vestments and covers for the Communion table.

Advent = Purple

Christmas = White

Epiphany = White

Lent = Purple

Palm Sunday = Red

Good Friday = Red

Easter = White

Ascension Day = White

Pentecost = Red

Trinity Sunday = White

Trinity = Green

Different kinds of **vestments** are worn by the ministers. The traditional clothing from the time of the Reformation is a surplice. At present many clergy wear an alb or a cassalb (a combination of a cassock and an alb). An alb is a long white garment. At the Communion

service they may also wear a coloured stole. The colour agrees with the season. At other services some wear a black scarf with the surplice.

6. In Conclusion

An ancient Christian adage says, ‘the law of prayer (worship) is the law of belief’ (“lex orandi, lex credendi”)³ which means that how we worship will influence what we believe.⁴ (To this is often added the words, “is the law of life”.) Hence the use of the (or a) Prayer Book is not just incidental but will reinforce and promote different beliefs from that of more free-wheeling, contemporary services for example.

Discussion

1. The BCP is little used today in Australia as far as I am aware. However, if you were in services before 1978 in Australia could you tell us what it was like using the BCP as opposed to today’s prayer book(s).
2. Is there a case for re-introducing the BCP for (say) one service a month so that we do not lose our connections with the past or do you think the BCP was for another time?

³ This saying is highly prominent in Roman and Eastern churches.

⁴ And vice versa.