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1662—Our Evangelical Future?

C. Peter Molloy

In the year 2000, I was ordained and set off to minister in a small northern Saskatchewan parish. Being a relatively recent convert to Anglicanism, having been raised and nurtured in both Baptist and Methodist traditions, I was quite excited to join a faithful, lively and intelligent college of priests, hoping that their experience would supplement my short Anglican history. As I began to meet the other clergy of the diocese, slowly my mother's words began coming back to me as I began to realise once again that I am 'not exceptional.' Among them, I found converts to Anglicanism from a wide range of churches: Pentecostal, Brethren, Mennonite, Charismatic, Lutheran; all having left the church of their youth and walking the Canterbury trail, as it were.

Common to many of us was a deep dissatisfaction with the theology and liturgy of the traditions in which we were raised. The particular hook upon which I was caught and reeled into Anglicanism was the Book of Common Prayer. Perhaps it was the novelty of this new-found treasure that caused me to cherish it so, but I really think it was more than that.

Having grown up in an Evangelical home and church, I often find old friends and family are curious about 'why I switched.' I am always pleased to respond that in Anglicanism, by which I really mean within the Book of Common Prayer, I have found a much more robust Evangelicalism. Becoming an Anglican was not so much a rejection of the Evangelical convictions I was raised on, but rather finding a tradition which more effectively promotes them. Evangelicals who hold dear the priorities of the authority of Scripture, the need for conversion and a liturgy and theology which centres on Christ Jesus' atoning act on the Cross, should find in the Book of Common Prayer a living tradition which will guard and nurture their ministry. The Book of Common Prayer, through the effective way in which these central Christian tenets are promulgated, is a great light which can bring doctrinal clarity within the church and Gospel clarity within the world. Evangelicals would do well to recommit themselves to the Prayer Book way.

Let us consider how these Evangelical concerns are promoted through the Book of Common Prayer.

Devote Yourself to the Public Reading of Scripture...

The church is not always given to subtlety, and the theological priorities of a given

institution are usually fairly easy to discern from its name or motto. St John's College, Nottingham, for instance, uses 'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.'¹ Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, named after the great English translator, uses the motto, '*Via, Veritas, Vita*': the Way, the Truth and the Life.² Its colonial counterpart, Wycliffe College, Toronto, claims for itself '*Verbum Domini manet*': The Word of the Lord Endures.³ The message is clear: we Evangelicals are Bible Christians. Anglo-Catholics may have their traditions, and the Charismatics may have the Holy Spirit, but Evangelicals stand firm on the Word of God. It might sound far-fetched, but it is even possible that this can be a source of spiritual pride for Evangelicals.

These distinctions are, of course, a matter of emphasis. I remember a conversation with a senior and godly Anglo-Catholic priest one afternoon at my first clergy retreat. I was raising the Evangelical flag at every opportunity, and so he kindly asked me to describe what distinguished Evangelicals. With great pride I explained that 'we uphold the authority of God's Holy Word.' He quite charitably mused that he had never been aware that he did otherwise, and proceeded to lead us in Evening Prayer.

That being said, Evangelicals do place a distinct emphasis on the unique authority of Scripture and confidence in its transforming power, and we should take particular care that our liturgy reflects that. Paul writes in his second letter to Timothy: 'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.'⁴ This is one of the foundational passages for the Evangelical belief that Scripture has a transforming effect, that through the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God changes hearts and minds for the daily battle of living a life of godliness and furthering the Kingdom of God. To this end Paul reminds Timothy that his duty as a Christian leader is to keep Scripture before the eyes of the fledgling body under his charge and so he writes, 'Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.'⁵ For Evangelicals, then, the Prayer Book should be regarded as a gift of great value as it simply is the Bible re-arranged for public worship. Regardless of whatever other challenges a parish might face, the Prayer Book keeps Scripture before their eyes.

I never grow tired of hearing visitors from other Evangelical churches remark, usually with some surprise, how biblical they found our service to be. By this they usually mean the amount of Scripture they heard read, how they were invited to

praise God through the words of Scripture in the Psalms and the Canticles, and the comprehensive and fundamentally biblical nature of prayer. Perhaps they would also have noted how the Book of Common Prayer justifies its every movement through relevant Scripture sentences, and hopefully they will have discerned that the standpoint of the preaching was one of faithfully applying the Scriptures appointed for the day. This is the great gift of the Prayer Book: it reads Scripture, offers praise through Scripture, prays scriptural concerns, and stands under the authority of Scripture—and that should warm the hearts of all Evangelicals.

This fundamental biblical characteristic is observed frequently when the Book of Common Prayer is discussed, but we should not let our familiarity with rare treasure diminish our appreciation of it. The Prayer Book's unique scriptural pattern of worship is not to be found in such fullness elsewhere. In modern Anglican liturgies, it is not the lack of beauty in the language, or the loss of the historic character of the liturgy that is their great failing (although these are both enormous losses): what we should lament most is the paucity of scriptural content and of a fundamentally scriptural character to our worship.

Other Reformed Churches make great use of Scripture, usually the recitation of the Psalms and Scripture readings, but usually not the fullness of the canticles and prescribed, scripturally formed prayers. When we look at non-liturgical Evangelical churches, while the teaching can often be thoroughly scriptural, the role of Scripture elsewhere in the service is quite limited. Perhaps it is read independent of the sermon, and usually scripture sentiments or phrases are alluded to in a praise song, but often Scripture is relegated to isolated verses which buttress the homiletical journey of the pastor. It is easy to see why John Wesley was justified in concluding that there is 'no Liturgy in the world, either in ancient or modern language, which breathes more of a solid, scriptural, rational piety than the Common Prayer of the Church of England.'⁶ How can Evangelicals, who see how formative public worship is, jettison such a biblical form?⁷

What is true of the public worship in the Book of Common Prayer is even truer of the pattern of private worship to which the Prayer Book invites all Christians. Here are to be found all of the same elements, the canticles and the biblical model of prayer in the Daily Office. But what we find in even greater measure is the priority of a comprehensive reading of Scripture. The Book of Common Prayer Daily Office lectionary encompasses a most rigorous pattern of Scripture reading.

If you followed the Daily Office lectionary over the course of a year, the Old Testament would be read once, the New Testament twice, and the Psalms 12 times. I suspect this observation is not new to readers of this journal, but it is nonetheless a remarkable gift, and enormously formative for any who follow this pattern.

Of course, liturgy should not be simply measured by the percentage of Scripture it contains, any more than whisky should be judged simply on its percentage of alcohol. If there is some hope of either having effect, however, we would do well to look for high content in its most potent ingredient. That being said, there are other qualities that should be considered, and here we see the Book of Common Prayer moving from strength to strength.

Simul Justus Et Peccator

Another point of emphasis in Evangelicalism is the need for conversion of heart. That is, we recognise that the Christian life requires a turning away from old patterns of sin and the concerns of this world; we see this clearly in the Book of Common Prayer.

I often hear jibes from my Evangelical friends of other denominations that Anglicans let people ‘get away with a lot,’ that perhaps we do not require people to repent and turn from their sins—and that it can be a pretty comfortable place for people to remain unchallenged. I ask in response whether they have ever been to a service where the Book of Common Prayer is employed. We find throughout the Prayer Book the challenge to live a life of repentance.

‘Repent Ye for the Kingdom of God is at hand’⁸ ushers in the Christian Year in the Daily Office. The Baptismal service requires a renunciation of ‘the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the sinful desires of the flesh.’ The Book of Common Prayer includes in every service a call to confession. The Daily Office invites us to ‘confess our manifold sins and wickedness; and that we should not dissemble nor cloke them before the face of Almighty God our heavenly Father.’ And then in our Holy Communion service all the communicants are gathered together in praying ‘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.’ It is hard to imagine how one might be more clear in calling for repentance.

On the other hand, there are many within the church who feel that the Book of Common Prayer charts too penitential a course—keeping us too preoccupied

with ‘bemoaning our manifold sins.’ Wonderfully, however, we see that the Prayer Book does not leave us in such a miserable estate but, through the mercy of God, the Priest or Bishop is instructed to pronounce these words: ‘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.’ We hear here the marvellous and gracious good news of having our sins forgiven. Not only that, however, as through the path of repentance and absolution we are also exhorted to move forward in faith. The absolution contains the sanctifying prayer that our repentance might be confirmed and strengthened by God, and made manifest in our growing in goodness: the very fruit of a true penitent heart, set free by Christ, to love as it ought. The daily repetition of this penitential pattern is a real strength in the Book of Common Prayer. It invites Christians into a life of conversion and renewed and increased repentance.

When I was a child, I attended a Methodist church camp which had evangelistic tent meetings each summer. It was the place where many of my siblings and I gave our hearts to the Lord. Now I was raised in a Christian home and cannot actually remember a time when I thought my heart belonged to anyone else. Yet, here at camp, I was invited each summer to turn away from sin and give my life to God, which I joyfully confess I did—several times each summer. I remember one year, as I was making my tearful journey to the altar rail, my cabin counsellor put his hand on my shoulder and suggested that I should return to my seat as I had ‘already done that.’ To be fair, I had, in his presence, ‘done it’ in previous years, and earlier that week. Yet stubbornly I pressed forward, because the words of the call were still true. I was still a sinner and I wanted to repent and know forgiveness. I fear that yet another letter on the subject of my wilfulness was sent home to my parents.

It is, of course, not quite fair to contrast Thomas Cranmer’s understanding of redemption and sanctification with that of a 15-year-old camp counsellor. However, when I came as an adult to embrace Anglicanism, it was essentially along these lines: that I found for the first time in the Book of Common Prayer a pattern which took seriously my need for on-going conversion and repentance, a pattern that regarded conversion as a lifetime of slowly handing over more and more of my life, and not just a one-time event. Later on I discovered Luther’s wonderful formula which describes Cranmer’s approach so well: *Simul Justus Et Peccator*, that is, ‘Righteous and at the same time a Sinner.’ This is the genius of the Book of Common Prayer: not that we beat our chests as men without

hope and wallow in our sin, but rather that in hopefulness we acknowledge our sin, receive grace and go forth in faith.

J. I. Packer sees this fundamentally Evangelical pattern as being the central logic of the Book of Common Prayer. He writes:

Cranmer saw that the way to make liturgy express the gospel is by use of a sequence of three themes. Theme one is the personal acknowledgment of sin; theme two is the applicatory announcement of God's mercy to sinners; theme three is the response of faith to the grace that is being offered. The sequence is evangelical and edifying—edifying, indeed, just because it is evangelical. Gospel truth is what builds us up!⁹

Surely this pattern, which sees the path to spiritual maturity through the recognition of both our offensive sin and God's redemptive grace, should be cherished by Evangelicals. The wonderful hymnody of the Wesleys, Newton and Cowper was saturated with this double knowledge of our wretchedness and God's grace. Hear Newton's glorious yet oft overlooked hymn 'Approach my Soul, the Mercy Seat':

Approach, my soul, the mercy seat,
Where Jesus answers prayer;
There humbly fall before His feet,
For none can perish there.

Bowed down beneath a load of sin,
By Satan sorely pressed,
By war without and fears within,
I come to Thee for rest.

O wondrous love! to bleed and die,
To bear the cross and shame,
That guilty sinners, such as I,
Might plead Thy gracious Name.

Similarly, one cannot help but see the marks of Cranmerian formation in the preaching of George Whitefield. His sermon 'Repentance and Conversion' reveals his recognition of the daily need to consider our simultaneous state of grace and sin as being necessary steps for growing in faith:

O ye servants of the most high God, if any of you are here tonight, though I am the chief of sinners, and the least of all saints, suffer the word of exhortation. I am sure I preach feelingly now; God knows I seldom sleep after three in the morning; I pray every morning, Lord, convert me, and make me more a new creature today. I know I want to be converted from a thousand things, and from ten thousand more: Lord God, confirm me; Lord God, revive his work.¹⁰

C. S. Lewis in his splendid essay ‘Miserable Offenders’ defends this confessional clarity against the attack of modern self-affirming sentiment thus:

A serious attempt to repent and really to know one’s own sins is in the long run a lightening and relieving process. Of course, there is bound to be at first dismay and often terror and later great pain, yet that is much less in the long run than the anguish of a mass of unrepented and unexamined sins, lurking the background of our minds. It is the difference between the pain of the tooth about which you should go to the dentist, and the simple straight-forward pain which you know is getting less and less every moment when you have had the tooth out.¹¹

What the Book of Common Prayer calls for, both explicitly in its liturgy and implicitly by encouraging all Christians to participate in the Daily Office, is a pattern of conversion and reconversion or increased conversion. While some might wish to move past this penitential moment and not dwell on it, Packer upholds this as a necessary part of our sanctification process and describes the re-treading of this ground as the tightening of the screw. The effect of this sanctifying pattern is that through faith and the daily recognition that we are sinners in need of repentance, God’s grace is known more and more to us as Christ Jesus’ victory is increased more and more in our lives and in his Church. This brings us to our final point.

But we preach Christ crucified...

Finally we turn to the Evangelical plank of Crucicentrism or the centrality of Christ and his atoning work on the Cross. The difficulty here is not in finding evidence of Cranmer’s Crucicentrism, but rather it is in selecting only a few examples. It is no exaggeration to say that you can barely open a page of the Book of Common Prayer which does not encourage the one praying implicitly or explicitly to put his or her hope in Christ alone. The Eucharistic

lections point again and again to Christ's salvific work. The Daily Office encourages us to bring our everyday concerns before God in the effective name of Christ Jesus. Virtually all of the Prayer Book points us to that wonderful and unique truth that Christ died for our sins and invites us to put our confidence in him. Perhaps, though, it is in the service of Holy Communion that we find Cranmer going to the greatest lengths to make this point clear.

I have found that it is always important to take note of where Cranmer's melodic line stumbles or is strained, because usually here we will find an instance where Cranmer has refused to subordinate his theological commitments to prose style. There is such an example in the declaration at the beginning of the Prayer of Consecration, over which many a new or sleepy priest has faltered:

ALMIGHTY God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; *who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world;* and did institute, and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death, until his coming again;...

This formula, a Cranmer original introduced in 1549 and clarified even further in 1552, seems somewhat awkwardly inserted into the Prayer of Consecration. Cranmer here takes great pains to insist on the absolute sufficiency of Christ's self-offering against the medieval theology of the Mass. Compare the above with the Gregorian Canon upon which Cranmer based much of his work. In the equivalent section in the Gregorian Canon, the *Te Igitur*, we see great weight placed on the effectiveness and worthiness of the Priest and the Church in making sacrifice:

Most merciful Father, we humbly pray and beseech Thee, through Jesus Christ Thy Son, Our Lord, to accept and to bless *these gifts, these presents, these holy unspotted Sacrifices, which we offer up to Thee*, in the first place, for Thy Holy Catholic Church, that it may please Thee to grant her peace, to preserve, unite, and govern her throughout the world;...

It is this theology of the Mass which clouds the unique role of Christ as a sinless mediator that Cranmer rejects in his Prayer of Consecration. Interestingly, he

does not give up the language of satisfaction as other Reformers had done. Instead he rightly attributes the completeness of this satisfaction to Christ Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice on the Cross. In case we are inclined to miss it he underlines the point in Article XXXI, *Of the one oblation of Christ finished upon the Cross*:

The offering of Christ once made is the perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual, *and there is none other satisfaction for sin but that alone.* Wherefore the sacrifices of Masses, in the which it was commonly said that the priests did offer Christ for the quick and the dead to have remission of pain or guilt, were blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits.

Article XXXI and its substantial manifestation in the Prayer of Consecration were the sharp end of the stick for Cranmer's Reformed assertion of the salvific uniqueness of Christ. As Ashley Null puts it, 'The heart of Cranmer's solifidianism was that salvation through any other means exalted man at God's expense.'¹² Evangelical Anglicans in our day should not be afraid to adhere to Cranmer's clear liturgy in our contemporary attempts to assert the uniqueness of Christ's once-for-all offering against the pernicious impulse of modern Anglicans to insert themselves into Christ's sacrifice.

Regrettably, the plethora of liturgical options available to contemporary Anglicans makes a line-by-line comparison virtually impossible, but suffice it to say that Cranmer's careful crucicentrism is rarely maintained.¹³ Looking at the modern rites in Common Worship, we see that the proximity of the Offering and the Prayer of Consecration has the effect of subtly conflating our offerings of the Eucharistic elements and our tithes with our Lord's once-for-all self-offering for the remission of sins. This is further enforced with misleading language which elevates our role and worthiness in the Eucharist through the offering of the gifts of Bread and Wine. We see one of many examples in Eucharistic Prayer B: 'As we offer you this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, we bring you this bread and this cup and we thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you.' Compare this with Cranmer's insistence that even the Eucharistic elements are God's gift to us who through our sin have no claim to participate whatsoever: '... we receiving these thy creatures of bread and wine,' and 'We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table.' It is an effective reversal of what Cranmer took great pains to establish.¹⁴

Michael Green, in his essay ‘New Testament Christianity is Reflected Courageously in the Book of Common Prayer,’ complains along similar lines that the modern Canadian rites betray both the Prayer Book and New Testament Christianity in that in the middle of each of the various options, they all say ‘We offer you this bread and this cup....’ The problem with this, he writes, is that:

...I don’t come to God in Holy Communion to tell Him what a fine fellow I am and to offer Him the bread and the cup. I’m not a fine fellow. I’m a deep-dyed sinner and I come to feed on that which makes alive and real to me His precious death for me. I come as a guest, who has no right even to be at that table except for His mercy. I am not worthy to pick up the crumbs under His table, were it not for His great mercy.

And I come on my knees as a sinner to Jesus, and it’s wonderful. I don’t come to offer Him the bread and the cup. I come to receive... the fruit of Calvary. His body broken and His blood shed; only in response to that can I offer Him my poor self and service.¹⁵

This absolute Crucicentric clarity, which Cranmer insists upon explicitly in the Prayer of Consecration and in Article XXXI and which undergirds the rest of the Book of Common Prayer, calls daily on all Christians, uniquely and finally to place all of their hope in Christ Jesus and his work, on the Cross. This sort of theological clarity is not found in other liturgies. Gregory Dix regarded Cranmer’s 1552 Book of Common Prayer as the ‘only effective attempt ever made to give liturgical expression to the doctrine of “justification by faith alone.”’¹⁶ This life-giving doctrine which was a driving force of the English Reformation has been effectively obscured and marginalised by attempts to ‘update the liturgy.’ Evangelicals would do well to follow Cranmer’s lead and not sacrifice doctrinal clarity for the sake of what they may perceive to be more pleasing form.

1662: Our Once and Future Prayer Book

It would be an understatement to say that twenty-first-century Anglicans face difficult times. Even if we could set aside for a moment the various differences which are straining the bonds of the Anglican Communion, we still face the enormous challenge of advancing the Gospel on the ground in parishes around the globe. In this there is a constant temptation for Evangelicals to jettison the Book of Common Prayer. The reasons for this are fairly straightforward. The Elizabethan language is antiquated and has the whiff of irrelevance, and in an era which cherishes free

expression the limited and prescribed responses of clergy and laity alike seem constrictive. And surely books themselves are a flat and obsolete technology in an age of PowerPoint and Kindles? With the parish church largely in decline, clergy and churches are anxious to ‘do something’ to revive interest in Christianity. Modernising liturgy is often seen as an easy, and frequently welcome, change. Yet at what cost?

Whatever short-term gains might be found in bringing in contemporary liturgies, this move almost certainly involves diminishing and distorting the clear Evangelical priorities which Cranmer set forth in 1552 and which were retained in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Regrettably, modern Anglicanism has set a greater priority on the style of the liturgy than on the substance. I am neither an historian nor a statistician, but it would seem that this impulse has not borne good fruit here in North America. And one cannot help but see how our distorted and ineffective Gospel witness relates immediately to a diminished view on these very issues that Cranmer attempted to set right: the authority of Scripture, our need for conversion and the work of Christ on the Cross.

I would urge fellow Evangelicals and Anglicans generally, as we prayerfully consider the way forward, to give serious consideration to retaining and (where it has been lost) restoring the Book of Common Prayer. It is the very root of English Evangelicalism, and what greater need have we in our modern confusion than to find and be nourished by our roots once again?

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ENDNOTES

1. 1 Cor 9:16.
2. John 14:6.
3. 1 Pet 1:25.
4. 2 Tim 3:16–17 (Unless otherwise indicated all quotations in this essay are taken from the English Standard Version).
5. 1 Tim 4:13.
6. From the Preface of *The Sunday Services of the Methodists in the United States of America with other Occasional Services* (1790).

7. It is worth noting that Christian formation is not the only, or even the first, priority of public worship. But it is often on the grounds that ‘people cannot get anything out of language they do not understand’ that the Book of Common Prayer is rejected. If we recognise that the primary purpose of worship is the glorification of God, then this argument against the Prayer Book appears much weaker.
8. Matt 3:2 (Coverdale translation).
9. J. I. Packer (1996), ‘For Truth, Unity and Hope: Revaluing the Book of Common Prayer,’ *The Machray Review* #58. The Machray Review was a Journal of the Prayer Book Society of Canada and is no longer published, but articles from past issues are available on line on the Prayer Book Society of Canada website, www.prayerbook.ca
10. *Whitefield’s Sermon Outlines*, selected and edited by Sheldon B. Quincer (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1956), pp. 67–68.
11. C. S. Lewis, ‘Miserable Offenders’ in *God in the Dock*, published in *The Collected Works of C.S. Lewis*, (Eerdmans, 1996), p. 384.
12. J. Ashley Null, *Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love*, (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 245.
13. To be fair, Common Worship does provide optional Eucharistic rites which do attempt to maintain Cranmer’s Crucicentric language, something which even the traditional language rite does not in Canadian Book of Alternative Services (1985). Reformed-minded Anglicans might appreciate this accommodation. The trouble, however, with Common Worship is not so much what is there, as what else is there. Rather than being a pattern for the public and private spiritual life of Anglican Christians as the Book of Common Prayer has been in the past, Common Worship exists as a resource book to allow for whatever liturgical tastes exist in any given parish. This cafeteria approach cannot effectively form a Church along the Evangelical lines that Cranmer held to be so important. Common Worship relegates Cranmer’s careful Crucicentrism to the status of an option for those who like that sort of thing.
14. The reader perhaps might think that this is splitting hairs, but often this sort of careful attention to meaning is the difference between orthodoxy and heresy (i.e. the difference between *Homoousios* and *Homoiousios*). It is the duty of the parish priest to pay careful attention to such matters for the sake of the parish. With the rise of Parish Communion Movement this becomes even more important, as even slight distinctions repeated weekly can be either formative or deformative.
15. Michael Green (1996), ‘New Testament Christianity is Reflected Courageously in the Book of Common Prayer,’ *The Machray Review* #58.
16. Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, (Dacre Press, 1945), p. 672.