

Remember to Survive

There are lessons to be learned from early Christian history about the survival and propagation of the Christian faith. I am thinking of the decades before and after the close of the apostolic age in circa AD 100. The great apostolic leaders had passed on, there was considerable theological confusion due to Gnosticism and other deviant views on the one hand, and lack of creedal and canonical definition on the other and, furthermore, the Lord had not returned.

One important element in apostolic and early post-apostolic Christianity was a willingness to learn from *Jewish* practices. Initially, the first Christians were Jews and the Jewish influence in the churches continued into the second century.

So Christianity grew out of the soil of Judaism, a Judaism that in previous centuries had *survived* the fires of persecution and the subtle seduction of Greek beliefs and practices.

The Synagogue Liturgy arose during the Hellenistic age from about 300 BC when the faith and hope of the covenant people was being swamped by the insidious beliefs in the gods and heroes of the Greeks and their free wheeling sexual practices.

In much the same way, our churches are being swamped by secularism, neo-Gnostic new age philosophies and post-modernist individualism. The synagogue liturgy served the Jewish people well, both within Palestine (using Aramaic) but also in the far flung congregations of the Diaspora (using Greek).

Repetition and *memory* were critical. And so the light of Israel was kept alight among the nations.

We can learn from the tenacity of the synagogue how to survive our own testing times.

Christians adapted Jewish Practices

Consider some of the parallels:

- Jews gathered on a *fixed day* but so too did the Christians.
- The core activity of the synagogue was the *reading and teaching of the Scriptures*, but this was likewise the basic reason for church meetings, except that to the Old Testament they added readings from the writings of the apostles.
- The Jews *translated* their Hebrew scriptures into Greek and the early Christians translated their Greek texts into Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian.
- The synagogues used *liturgical* forms like the *Shema* ('Hear, O Israel...') and the Benedictions and so too the churches formulated and recited their Trinitarian and Christological creeds.

- The Jews created their *calendar* to commemorate great feasts (like the Passover) but so too did the Christians develop their calendar (notably to celebrate Easter). The dispute over the timing highlights its importance.
- Jews *remembered* their deliverance from Egypt in the annual Passover and Christians recalled their deliverance in the weekly (?) remembrance meal, the Lord's Supper.
- Jews inducted their children into the covenant by *catechetical* instruction and so likewise the Christians developed their manuals for instruction prior to the Easter baptisms.
- The Jewish communities understood the need for a *succession of teachers* in the appointment of great rabbis to preserve the Mosaic tradition, but so too did the Christians appreciate the principle of a succession of strong and orthodox leaders, e.g., Irenaeus learned from Polycarp; Polycarp from John; John from Jesus.
- Synagogue rulers and elders *governed* the synagogues and the churches developed similar offices, though with different names.
- Synagogues exercised *discipline* of wayward members (often by harsh corporal punishment like the 39 stripes) and the churches suspended or expelled apostates, heretics and the immoral.

Thus, in the face of forces that would destroy them the churches consciously or unconsciously looked to the practices of the synagogues as means of survival, and adapted them accordingly.

The Christians of the second century survived the ravages of persecution and moral syncretism and the destructive influences of Gnosticism and later of Arianism.

Despite the opposition they faced they developed forms of welfare assistance for the disadvantaged, including for those who were not believers. By these and other means they won the attention of Constantine and others and, as it is said, the rest is history. Within just over two centuries the tiny Jesus movement became the faith of the Roman Empire. Rodney Stark is very helpful here.

Today there are groups like the Pentecostals who have grown remarkably. Anglican evangelicals have not witnessed comparable growth but they have an important role to play in Australian Christianity.

In particular, they can provide a theological and ecclesiastical stability that will buttress and support Christianity in our nation. An important part of that stability would be a hoped for commitment to received practices like Bible reading and Bible-based preaching, (contemporary) liturgy, creeds, use of church Calendar and the Collects and – not least – willingness to apply constructive church discipline.

There are some who follow these practices out of a love of tradition, a tradition that is often dressed in aesthetic clothing so that these things become ends in themselves, a veneration of the past and of beautiful forms. This is not what I am talking about.

Evangelicals, wary of such an approach, sometimes merely reject all ‘traditional’ elements as a distraction from the central task of making disciples and building them up in the faith. As well, evangelicals in their love of the gospel place great emphasis on preaching and the preacher and often pay scant attention to liturgy, sacraments, calendar or the ‘form’ of the meeting of the saints.

This may have several unwelcome consequences. One is the ‘cult of the preacher’ with the equivalent devaluing of the congregation, the ‘church of God’; also with it a kind of iconoclasm and cultural philistinism.

Another is that the emphasis on the existential, the ‘now’ that can leave a weak sense of our past (‘where we have come from’) or our future (‘where we are going’). The amazing survival of Judaism due to Jewish tenacity to their ‘traditions’ is worth pondering. Evangelical emphasis on the ‘now’ might mean an impact ‘today’ but might mean little or none for ‘tomorrow’.

Good liturgy requires systematic Bible reading, a reminder of our need for divine forgiveness, the sharing of creeds that reinforce what we believe, the observation of a calendar to remind us of great doctrines of the faith. They are useful vehicles and in the long term better than no vehicles.

These are turbulent times but that is true to a greater or lesser degree of all historical eras. It is the nature of life. As in every age we face a twofold challenge. On the one hand, we are to ‘make disciples’ and, on the other, we are to ‘contend for the faith’, that is, defend and preserve it.

In our passion for the first we must not disregard the second. The lessons the early Christians learned from the Jews are worth learning again. These are practices and structures that have served us in the past and which, as we fill them with evangelical content, will help carry forward into the future.

Liturgical Elements in Paul’s Letters

It is worth reflecting on the range of liturgical elements we find in Paul’s letters. These he ‘christianized,’ dramatically adapting them from Jewish monotheism to identify God as ‘our Father,’ to Jesus as his ‘Son, our Lord, and to ‘the Spirit of the living God’.

So many of these liturgical fragments do we find in a typical letter of Paul that the letter itself is almost a liturgy, a replica Christian service of that time. To read a Pauline letter from beginning to end is almost to look through a window into the gathering of a Gentile church of the period.

Consider the following examples.

An Opening Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:2).

A Thanksgiving and Intercession

We always thank God for all of you mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 1:2-3).

A Benediction

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be blessed forever, knows that I am not lying (2 Cor. 11:31).

A Confession of Faith (at a baptism?)

That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom 10:9)

A Kerygma-Creed

the gospel of God -

the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son,

who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and

who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead:

Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 1:2-3).

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance:

that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

that he was buried,

that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and

that he appeared to Peter,

and then to the Twelve.

After that, he appeared to more than five hundred ...

time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep

Then he appeared to James,

then to all the apostles...

(1 Cor. 15:3-7)

A Doxology

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen (Rom. 11:36).

Now to him who is able to establish you...to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen (Rom. 16:25, 27).

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1Tim 1:17).

The Lord's Supper

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you:
 The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed,
 took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said,
 ‘This is my body, which is for you;
 do this in remembrance of me.’
 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying,
 ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood;
 do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’
 (1 Cor. 11:23-25)

Prayer for Peace

Finally, brothers...live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.
 Greet one another with a holy kiss (2 Cor. 13:11-12).

A ‘Christ’ Grace

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen (Phil. 4:23).

A Trinitarian Grace

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2 Cor. 13:14).

Liturgical and Extempore

When Paul established the churches of the Gentiles he departed from the synagogue practice in terms of its fixity. Paul encouraged the expression of Christian beliefs in an *extempore* manner by members other than ‘officials,’ what we might call the ‘charismatic’ or ‘gift’ principle by ordinary people. These extempore ministries included prayer - including for healings, prophecy, and ecstatic speech.

Thus the churches (as opposed to the synagogues) had both fixed liturgical elements but also gift-related (‘charismatic’) elements. The former provided for stability of belief and continuity through tough times, not least since such elements were the basis for catechising and instruction. The latter, however, provided for Spirit-inspired leadership and direction.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Paul left behind altogether the liturgical elements of the synagogue, from which he had come.

Both elements are desirable. Where the liturgical alone is found there is often spiritual deadness, a church being wedded to the past for tradition’s sake and nothing more. On the other hand, where the ‘charismatic’ reigns individualism also reigns with its tendency to schism and the rise of dubious beliefs and practices.

The point of this short paper is to provoke reflection into the extent and character of ‘fixed’ forms in the Letters of St Paul. Furthermore, it is to encourage the use of those forms in our churches and as a basis for the minister’s catechetical and pastoral teaching based those confessions, doxologies, creeds etc., as noted above.

Not only will such teaching help our churches survive these difficult times into the next generations, equally they will prove to be edifying to the people now.

Remember to Survive

Why do edifying liturgical elements help us survive?

Quite simply, it is because they are *remembered* through repetition. Clearly, they had been cast in a memorable form. Think only of the famous Pauline ‘Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit...’

I heard recently of an elderly minister in hospital who had a great impact on those near him, despite having lost his short-term memory. The Alzheimer sufferer remembered exactly the prayers he had used over the years and continued to pray them quietly in the hearing of others. He was sustained by his memory of godly truth and others nearby were inspired to believe.

In times of need it is the ‘memory verse’ or the stanza of an Isaac Watts hymn that brings us blessing and encouragement. The Christian mind is blessed by the Christian memory. And the repetition of godly words creates its own imprint on the memory.

The Book of Common Prayer

Last year was the 350th Anniversary of the Book of Common Prayer.

In 1660 the monarchy was restored in England, ending the decade or so rule under Cromwell’s ‘commonwealth’. That decade witnessed the rise of Puritan and Presbyterian influence. But in 1662 the Act of Uniformity was passed and accompanied by authorization of the Book of Common Prayer in that year.

This meant a reintroduction of the uniform use in churches of services that originated with Archbishop Cranmer’s 1552 services. The 1662 services made only minor changes to the century old 1552 Prayer Book.

However, many ‘non-conforming’ clergy were not conscientiously able to fall in with the Book of Common Prayer and about a thousand were forced out of the Church of England. We honour them for their integrity.

Unfortunately some ministers today make oaths to comply with doctrines and liturgies that they either don’t intend to keep or which they fail to keep. Where is the integrity in that?

Thus 1662 was a momentous year in Christian England. It represented the beginning of the subsequent division between the Church of England and other churches.

The three-legged Stool

1662 gave us a three-legged stool – the BCP, the Ordinal and the 39 articles of Religion.

The BCP was the public face of Christianity with liturgies for Sunday and liturgies for the 'occasions' of life – birth, marriage, death.

The Ordinal set out the beliefs and practices to be followed by Bishops, Priests and Deacons.

The 39 Articles of Religion specified the doctrines of the church.

The BCP: three Realities

First: The BCP expresses a faith that is 'catholic'.
The word means 'whole' or 'complete'.

It means a 'complete' account of Christian truth, based on the canonical scriptures. In the early centuries 'catholic' defined those committed to the great creeds – belief about the incarnation of the Son of God, his bodily resurrection and his revelation of the Divine Trinity.

In contrast to the 'catholic' were those who were deemed 'heretic' or schismatic'.

The BCP expresses 'catholic' Christianity as defined by the Ecumenical Creeds of the early centuries.

Second: The BCP expresses a faith that is 'reformed'.

The medieval church departed from the NT in important matters.

- Jesus commanded 2 sacraments – baptism and the Lord's Supper – the Roman church introduced 5 others.
- The gospel teaches that sinners are saved by grace; the medieval church taught that sinners were saved by religious works.
- Jesus taught that divine authority is found in the Bible; the medieval church taught that authority was located in the Pope.

In response Cranmer provided for extensive church reading of the Old Testament, New Testament and the Psalms.

Reading of the Bible is the central part of the services of the BCP.

Following the reading of the Bible comes the creed.

We the people make our response to God's Word in the Bible by saying, 'I or We believe...'

Cranmer made the Bible central in BCP services.

Cranmer was influenced by the teaching of the Apostle Paul in chapter 14 of First Corinthians: 'If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual man let him acknowledge

that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord' (v. 27). The written word is authoritative over what others speak.

Also based on 1 Cor. 14 Cranmer insisted that Church services must be intelligible to the mind. Without the engagement of the mind there is no edification.

Furthermore, Cranmer understood well that Church services need to be orderly for the sake of edification.

Third: The BCP expresses a faith that is defended liturgically. Liturgy is not for aesthetics but employed to defend truth.

- By confession of sins acknowledging the need for forgiveness.
- By sustained reading of the Bible followed by the Creeds.
- By using a church calendar for the great festivals and their doctrines:
 - Incarnation at Christmas and the atonement and hope at Easter.
 - The call to repentance in Lent.
 - The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.
 - The Ascension of the Lord on Ascension Day.
 - The reality of the Trinity on Trinity Sunday.
 - The Second Coming at Advent.

Each needs to be emphasized throughout the year.

But the Calendar gives opportunity to highlight these.

The calendar provides ministers opportunity to preach doctrinally.

The 'collects' are prayers that 'collect' great doctrines of the faith.

The Future of the BCP?

The BCP has survived non-conformist splits.

The BCP has nurtured leaders like C.S. Lewis, J.I. Packer, J. R.W. Stott.

But the BCP has struggled in the past century:

- The Oxford Movement of the 1800s moved the Church of England in a Roman Catholic direction.

The first Anglo-Catholics were theologically conservative and creedal.

Today many Anglo-Catholics are theologically liberal. For them the Christian Religion is about aesthetics, a mystical experience. The items in the creeds are metaphors.

- Another more recent struggle is evangelical individualism. Post-modernism puts emphasis on the individual and evangelicals tend to be robust individuals. Many depart from the principle of commonality and uniformity and design their own services away from BCP. There is one Bible reading (or even none); there is no creed (or just occasionally); there is no calendar and no collects.

For them preaching the preacher is the all-important thing. The loss of liturgy means that the voice of the congregation is substantially silenced. Leaving only a single voice of the leader or preacher.

For many the preacher has replaced the liturgy as the defender of true doctrine. This is not the spirit of classical Anglicanism.

Into the future

Regrettably many, perhaps most, younger Anglicans have had little or no exposure to that classical Anglicanism.

In passing, it must be acknowledged that the original BCP liturgies were rather long-winded and overdue for shortening and modernising.

The situation today is that many evangelicals would regard even a modern Prayer Book Service as 'High Church' rather than what it truly is, 'Simply Anglican'.

Evangelical Anglicans are often 'victims of their own success'. Their skills in Bible Teaching and the orthodoxy of their churches have attracted the membership of many from other denominations where the Bible has been set aside. Through lack of understanding of 'Anglican' elements (notably liturgy) these new members have often influenced the de-anglicanizing of our churches. Many rectors have not resisted these pressures. Furthermore, the impact of modern 'songs' and the use of technology (e.g., Power Point) have put pressure on more traditional employment of liturgy. But Anglicanism and technology can join in a happy marriage given the good will to do so.

If Classical Anglicanism is to survive its values must be instilled at the Seminary. Here we face the challenge that many who study theology today are not heading for ordination, indeed many are not Anglican. While this is a matter for rejoicing it also presents a challenge. Chapel Services are often weakly Anglican and Anglican doctrine and practice do not feature in the syllabus. Inevitably, therefore, those seminary graduates who enter ordained ministry do so with little understanding of the BCP and its treasures. It's not so much that they are 'anti' as uninformed.

Rectifying this is no easy challenge. But at least two things can be done. One is the provision of a syllabus stream in the seminary that is devoted to the doctrines and values of the BCP, Ordinal and Articles including instruction in the articles, the Lord's Supper, and the Baptismal and Occasional Services. The other is for a related stream of well-conducted modern BCP worship on (say) a weekly basis for those who are ordination candidates within the Seminary.

Here Regent College Vancouver offers a useful paradigm. That College is not Anglican, but cross-denominational. Yet it offers a specifically Anglican Studies stream for students headed for ordination, presided over by no less a figure than J.I. Packer.

If we do nothing then the days of classical and historic Anglicanism may be numbered. I pray that may not be the case for the loss would be great.