

THE GOSPEL IN THE PRAYER BOOK



*Collected short writings by J. I. Packer on
The Book of Common Prayer (1662)*

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In these pages, Dr. J. I. Packer explains how the gospel of Jesus Christ is at the very center of the Book of Common Prayer (1662). These words were written by Packer when he was a young priest in the Church of England, originally as a series of short pieces to be used as inserts in parish magazines. They are reprinted here with Dr. Packer's permission.

THE GOSPEL IN THE LITURGY

Do we value the Prayer Book enough?

Do we appreciate its real quality?

Do we make the best use of it?

Certainly, the Prayer Book does not play in the lives of the present-day churchmen anything like the part it played in the Christian practice of their great-grandfathers. A century ago, Christians wove Prayer Book prayers into both private and family devotions as a matter of course. Their Bible reading followed the psalms and lessons set for each day. They memorized the catechism in youth, and dwelt on it constantly in later life. Their Prayer Book was prized and well-used.

But all that has changed. Many modern Anglicans do not even own a Prayer Book. Their Bible study scheme, if they have one, owes nothing to the lectionary. They rarely hear, nor do they wish to hear, what used to be called 'Prayer Book teaching' – exposition of the Articles and services. The Prayer Book has little hold on their affections. They patronize it, treating it as a rather faded family antique, nothing like as precious as their forbears imagined. They seem to have no inkling of its real worth.

Evangelicals

The attitude of some Evangelicals, in particular, contrasts strikingly with that of a former generation. A century and a half ago, Charles Simeon, vicar of Holy Trinity, Cambridge, and preacher of a famous set of University sermons on *The Excellency of the Liturgy*, never lost an opportunity of praising the Prayer Book and criticizing its critics. The deadness and formality experienced in the worship of the Church arise far more from the low state of our graces than from any defect in our Liturgy.

But many today treat the set services as a mere stodgy preliminary, tending only to take the edge off one's appetite, and the idea of the Prayer Book as an aid to spiritual worship leaves them cold.

In this situation, what is needed is a detailed account of the Prayer Book's particular virtues. The following pages began as articles in the parish magazine inset *News Extra*. They seek to show in briefest outline how the English Liturgy sets forth the gospel and leads us into ways of evangelical worship.

The Gospel

The gospel is the good news that God is love. 'In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins' (1 John 4:8-10). The background of the gospel is God's wrath and judgment against us sinners. The heart of the gospel is the double truth of propitiation for sin, and remission of sin – through the cross of Christ, atonement by blood, and justification by faith. 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.... He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him' (2 Cor. 5:19, 21).

Mainspring

The gospel of free forgiveness through Christ crucified appears as the mainspring of worship throughout the whole Prayer Book, and it is noticeable that current discontent with the Prayer Book is strongest among those whose grasp on this gospel is most suspect. A modern prophet, in an article entitled *Un-Christian Liturgy*, has censured the Prayer Book stress on guilt and pardon as morbid and unhealthy. Our own judgment goes rather with Simeon:

‘I seek to be, not only humbled and thankful, but humbled in thankfulness, before my God and Savior continually. This is the religion that pervades the whole Liturgy, and particularly the Communion Service; and this makes the Liturgy inexpressibly sweet to me.

‘The repeated cries for mercy to each Person of the ever-adorable Trinity for mercy, are not at all too frequent or too fervent for me; nor is the Confession in the Communion service too strong for me; nor the Te Deum, nor the ascriptions of glory after the Lord’s Supper, Glory be to God on high, etc. too exalted for me this shows what men of God the framers of our Liturgy were, and what I pant, and long, and strive to be.

‘This makes the Liturgy as superior to all modern compositions, as the work of a Philosopher on any deep subject is to that of a schoolboy who understands scarcely anything about it.’

THE GOSPEL IN THE PRAYER BOOK

Evangelical Worship

Dating as it stands from 1662, our Prayer Book is in all essentials the work of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. Most churchmen know (for the Prayer Book prefaces ‘Concerning the Service of the Church’ and ‘Of Ceremonies’ tell us) that when Cranmer reshaped the traditional services, his aim was threefold.

It was to make the Anglican worship (1) congregational (hence the title ‘The Book of Common Prayer’ – common means communal); (2) simple (hence the dropping of pre-Reformation ceremonial); and (3) edifying (hence the prominence of Scripture reading, psalm singing, and exhortation). Less often seen, however, is the fact that Prayer Book worship is also a monument to Cranmer’s concern that Anglican worship should be evangelical, that is, a setting forth in liturgy of the gospel.

In fact, as Cranmer grasped, only evangelical worship can be edifying. For edification (literally, building up) means the creating and deepening of Christian experience within the church’s fellowship. The sole means whereby the Spirit of God produces Christian experience is the gospel of Christ, declared audibly in word and visibly by sacraments. Christian worship, therefore, must embody the gospel, and be so designed as to lead worshippers into a renewed experience of its power.

Sin, Grace, Faith

To join in a service of worship is to be taken on a journey through a prescribed series of thoughts and actions. How did Cranmer secure evangelical worship? By routing his regular services via a sequence of three themes: first, the detecting and confessing of sin; second, the

announcing of grace, in God's promise to pardon and restore the penitent through Christ; third, the exercising of faith, first in believing God's promise and trusting him for pardon, and then in acts of praise, testimony, intercession, and obeying instruction, all based on the prior restoring of fellowship with God through forgiveness. All the main Prayer Book services have this built-in evangelical design.

Examples

See this in Morning and Evening Prayer. First comes penitence: 'We have erred and strayed' – 'there is no health in us' – 'Restore thou those who are penitent'.

Next, the good news of grace is proclaimed, calling us to faith: 'God pardoneth and absolveth all those who truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel.'

So now we say the Lord's Prayer, as a plea for pardon and power against sin henceforth: 'forgive us our trespasses' – 'deliver us from evil'.

The psalm singing that follows thus becomes what biblical praise always is, praise for mercy received. 'I believe' confesses Jesus Christ our Lord as our own personal Saviour. We pray to God with boldness, as his adopted children, and we learn from the lessons and sermon in a spirit of filial obedience and gratitude. This is evangelical worship.

Who will find such services dull? Only the unconverted!

THE GOSPEL IN HOLY COMMUNION

The Prayer Book gives worship an evangelical shape by constructing services in terms of the sequence: sin acknowledged – grace announced – faith exercised in response. This sequence of themes constitutes the gospel in liturgy.

Anglicans who worship with Free Church friends often feel that, good as non-liturgical services with free prayer can be, Prayer Book worship is more satisfying. Why? The reason seems to be that the sin-grace-faith sequence, which contains at once the essence of the gospel, the heart of Christian experience, and the first need of every man who would approach God, is less prominent in most Free Church worship than it is in the Prayer Book.

Sacraments

The Prayer Book sees the sacraments as applicatory signs, ordained by Christ to confirm to us the truths and promises of the gospel. Some talk as if the gospel is about the sacraments, but the Prayer Book position is rather that the sacraments are about the gospel. Accordingly, the chief concern of its sacramental services is to preach the gospel; hence they, too, are built in terms of the sin-grace-faith sequence. We shall see this in the Holy Communion service.

Holy Communion

Like most masterpieces, the Prayer Book Communion service has a basic structure that is extremely simple; just three repeats of the sin-grace-faith cycle, like three turns of a screw, each going further than the last in fixing the gospel in our hearts and drawing out our response to it. The second adds to the first a sharpened application; the third adds to the second a sacramental confirmation. The service is built up thus.

First cycle. The ante-communion: (1) acknowledgement of sin by the

collect for purity and the hearing of the law, with the response 'Lord, have mercy upon us'; (2) proclaiming of grace by New Testament readings; (3) responsive exercise of faith, in testimony ('I believe'), learning of God (the sermon), giving to God (the collection), and prayer for the church on earth.

Second cycle. (1) acknowledgment of sin in the confession; (2) proclaiming of grace, first in the prayer of absolution ('God hath promised forgiveness of sins'), and then in the comfortable words; (3) responsive exercise of faith, in thanksgiving for this grace ('Let us give thanks' – 'Glory be to thee, O Lord Most High').

Third cycle. (1) acknowledgement of sin, in the prayer of humble access, confessing our unworthiness to come to the table; (2) proclaiming of grace, in the prayer of consecration, which expounds the cross ('a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world'), and the delivering of the tokens of the cross to each worshipper; (3) responsive exercise of faith, in fresh thanks, self-giving, and adoration of God on high and his exalted Son.

No other Communion service in the world is so full of the gospel. Would that modern Anglicans appreciated it more!

THE GOSPEL AT HOLY BAPTISM

Here's a challenge. How would you write a baptism service? Any ideas? It's not so easy! This was Cranmer's problem four centuries ago. Do we realize how brilliantly he tackled it?

Baptism's Meaning

In the New Testament, baptism appears as, to quote Article 27, 'not only a sign of profession and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened', but first and foremost 'a sign of regeneration or new birth'. It signifies cleansing from sin and a new life with God, through union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Baptism is a God-given acted parable of the Saviour receiving a sinner, washing away his guilt, and renewing his nature.

To believers, baptism is God's assurance of the reality of their forgiven and accepted status. (This is the meaning of 'be baptized ... for the remission of sins', Acts 2:38). To babies, baptism is God's pledge of everlasting salvation, provided baptismal promises are kept.

As embodying the gospel of a new start with Christ, baptism is the entry rite into the church visible. So a congregation should always be present, to witness the reception of its new members, to welcome them into fellowship, and to show their love by praying for them.

Prayer Book Service

These facts provide a set of specifications which the Prayer Book service fully meets. It prescribes baptism during Morning or Evening Prayer, when the congregation is together. It precedes the administering of the sign by elucidating the gospel, of which it is a sign, using the sin-grace-faith sequence of which we wrote earlier. And at each transition point it leads the congregation in an appropriate act of prayer for the candidate's salvation. It falls into four stages.

Stage 1: sin. A child born a sinner is presented for baptism. The congregation prays that he may be born again.

Stage 2: grace. A gospel story showing Christ's willingness to bless children is read and applied. This reminder of the reality of grace evokes further prayer.

Stage 3: faith. The godparents commit the child to a life of faith and repentance. The congregation prays that the child may be enabled to live the life to which he now stands pledged.

Stage 4: sacrament. The child is received into the church by baptism. The congregation prays 'that he may lead the rest of his life according to this beginning' – actually partake in the experience of Christ's death and resurrection, and so enjoy actual salvation, both here and hereafter. (The final prayer shows that 'seeing now that this child is regenerate' does not imply that he now has no need to repent and believe!)

Is the service muddled and obscure, as is often said? No, it is orderly and plain. Is it superstitious, as some suspect? No, it is a forthright liturgical statement of the gospel. Nowhere in the world will you find a more evangelical baptism service than in the Book of Common Prayer.

THE GOSPEL IN THE BURIAL SERVICE

Our Anglican burial service, unlike the Roman requiem, is not for the dead, but for the living. At funerals, we feel upset at having lost loved ones; moreover, facing death as the one certain fact of all our lives, we feel shaken inside, and start wondering what death will mean for us. The service applies the gospel of resurrection to our state of mind.

Assuming that a Christian is being buried, it shows us his risen Saviour, and then leads us, first to give thanks for his salvation (in the committal, and the two main prayers), and second to pray our way into that same salvation for ourselves. Praise for the dead, and then prayer for the living, is the pattern.

Three Voices

Three voices sound as the service opens:

‘I am the resurrection and the life He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live’ – this promise is the word of the Lord Jesus.

‘I know that my Redeemer liveth; ... in my flesh shall I see God’ – this is the witness of the Christian who now sleeps in Jesus.

‘The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord’ – this is the mourner’s acknowledgement, through his grief, of a sovereign God’s goodness.

Starting from the fact that to us, who are in God’s hands for life and death, Jesus Christ offers himself as the resurrection, the service now becomes a liturgical journey from spiritual death to spiritual life. Apart from the committal of the body, which is really a parenthesis and in

any case happens separately, the service falls into three sections, embodying the evangelical sequence: sin, grace, faith.

Death

First comes Psalm 39 or Psalm 90. Why these? Because both recognize the prospect of bodily death as revealing, not merely our dependence on God for bodily life, and the folly of self-sufficiency, but also God's wrath against us for our sins. 'We consume away in thy displeasure', and 'Thou . . . dost chasten man for sin', and 'Deliver me from all mine offences'. 'The sting of death', the thing that makes it dreadful, 'is sin', and God's judgment upon it. We cannot face death unafraid till our sin is dealt with.

Resurrection

After meditation on death comes proclamation of resurrection, as 1 Corinthians 15 is read. Jesus Christ has conquered death, and will raise the sinful sons of Adam into a new life of forgiveness and endless joy, here and hereafter. This is the message of grace.

New Birth

So we pray that God will raise us from the death of sin unto the life of righteousness, that, dying 'in the true faith of thy holy name', we too 'may have our perfect consummation and bliss, both in body and soul, in thy eternal and everlasting glory'. This is a prayer that we may be led to living faith in him who is the resurrection, and so be born again.

If people at funerals thought about what they were saying and hearing, every funeral would be an evangelistic occasion! We should not think this strange; it is what the compilers of our Prayer Book intended, and surely they were right.

THE GOSPEL IN THE MARRIAGE SERVICE

What makes cohabitation into marriage is the vow of mutual fidelity on which it rests. Here Scripture and civil law agree. The heart of the marriage service is the making of this vow by the couple concerned, guided by a Christian minister, ‘in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation’. Before this goes a statement of the meaning and seriousness of marriage; after it comes prayer for the married couple and biblical guidance on married life, by sermon or Scripture reading.

Marriage, one might say, is a civil contract: why make a religious ceremony of it? The Prayer Book answer is: because of its place in God’s plan. We must acknowledge marriage as his good gift to us, and seek his help to use it as a means of grace. The service highlights this by setting the contract in the context of three facts.

God’s Holy Ordinance

Fact number one is law – the ideal standard God has set us. The opening declaration tells us that lifelong monogamy in what the Homily on Matrimony calls ‘a perpetual friendly fellowship’, with the raising and training of a family for God, is part of this ideal. Marriage, based on a promise of exclusive faithfulness, is God’s holy ordinance for sanctifying and satisfying our mating instincts. The service repeatedly points to God’s word, ordinance, and laws as setting a pattern for marriage. It warns us that if we flout God’s rules we shall have God against us, both here and hereafter, and urges us only to marry in the fear of God.

Men’s Carnal Lusts

Fact number two is sin – the faultiness of our nature, which makes us prone to lapse from God’s laws. The opening declaration is blunt and realistic – too realistic for some – about our constant inclinations to

unchastity, just as a later prayer recognizes that a life of perfect love and peace together is attainable only by divine gift. But it is a strength, not a weakness, that the service faces so frankly our inability to keep the law of marriage by our own strength.

Giver of Grace

Fact number three is grace – God’s active goodness to the weak and undeserving. Twice the service reminds us that marriage itself is an emblem of this, depicting the love of Christ for his spouse the Church, who gave himself for it, loving and cherishing it. And the burden of the three main prayers for the married couple is precisely that they may benefit from Christ’s love to the full. The first asks that they may be true Christians themselves (‘sow the seed of eternal life in their hearts’); the second, that their family may be Christian too (‘children Christianly and virtuously brought up’); the third, that, after a life of love together, both may ‘inherit thy everlasting kingdom’.

Every couple on their wedding day wonder: how can we find the very best in our marriage? The service gives the answer: by turning together to a gracious God.

THE GOSPEL IN THE LITANY

The Litany or General Supplication, a ten-minute prayer service, was the first part of the English Prayer Book to be written. Composed in 1544, in wartime, it stands as a pattern of prayer for all time. The test of a Christian's stature is how he prays, and so with churches too. The Litany shows what spiritual stature Cranmer wanted the Church of England to have.

The Lord's Prayer

Like all proper praying, the Litany expands on the themes of the Lord's Prayer. It approaches God as 'the Father of heaven', seeking 'the glory of thy name'. It asks that God's will may be done everywhere. It specifies our need of material help, and of forgiveness, and pleads in detail for deliverance from evil. It drills us in the art of conversation with God in 3 ways.

Ourselves

1. It teaches us to know ourselves as sinners. Ideas about God and man vary inversely. Great thoughts of man breed small thoughts of God; high thoughts of God bring low thoughts of ourselves. The Litany has a majestic view of God as sovereign and just, and hence takes a humbling view of man as weak and sinful. It points to 'our sins, negligences, and ignorances'; and our proneness to 'pride, vainglory and hypocrisy'; 'envy, hatred, and malice'; 'fornication'; 'hardness of heart and contempt of thy word'. It shows us to God, and to ourselves, as 'miserable [pitiable] sinners', needing 'true repentance' and 'a heart to love and dread thee'.

It makes us reckon, not merely with the human hostility which Christians sooner or later incur, if they are faithful, but also with the crafts and assaults of the devil of which they have to run the gauntlet.

Does this humbling realism strike us as false and repellent? If so, we are self-deceived, and urgently need the Litany to lead us to self-knowledge.

Our God

2. It teaches us to know God as our Saviour. The Litany starts by invoking each person of the triune God, and thenceforth alternates petitions between the Father and the Son. It recognizes the reality of God's present anger against his people's sins, and his coming wrath against the impenitent. But it invokes him throughout as our 'good Lord' – meaning thereby not only generous in giving natural gifts, but also merciful to his own flawed creatures. Through Jesus' mediation and the coming of the Holy Ghost, God pardons, protects, and empowers for holy living. Man's need is great, but God can meet it. That is the gospel of the Litany.

Our Neighbor

3. It teaches us to know others as our neighbours. Knowing God's love to us, we love him in return, and when we love God every man becomes our neighbor, to be loved for his sake. So the Litany leads us on from personal trust in Christ to pray that God will have mercy on all men.

Do you ever dry up in prayer, feeling you have nothing to say? Live with the Litany, and that will not happen again!