

A Critique of ACNA's Initial Report of the Prayer Book and Common Liturgy Task Force

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It is no surprise that the newly-formed Anglican Church of North America has begun already to consider the question of worship. And the “Initial Report” of the “Prayer Book and Common Liturgy Task Force” is now in circulation. Its task was to “develop a ‘theological lens’” through which a “thoroughly orthodox prayer book” might be composed. Although not without some strengths, in that it sets forth some of the chief questions to be considered, as a whole the Report is disappointing: both confused and confusing, polemical, and sometimes contradictory.

For a start, the document is too complex (a much simpler numbering system would make references easier) and somewhat disorganized. There is a confusing mismatch between what the preamble promises and what the body of the report delivers.

Such confusion suggests hasty or careless compilation, and at times the Initial Report sounds like the minutes of a disjointed, unfinished, and inconclusive discussion, rather than a coherently worked out statement. This would be reasonable, if the Initial Report confined itself to raising questions for study and discussion. In some places it does so, but in others it reaches premature conclusions, based on highly tendentious and polemical argumentation. And much of the discussion is sketchy and unfocussed.

The criticisms of the Report that are offered below may seem rather blunt, but there is no intention to pick a fight. The questions which the Report raises are too important to be reduced to point-scoring and polemic, and I apologize to its authors if my own comments seem harsh. It is my hope that the criticisms will spur and perhaps assist the Task Force in its further work.

A Theological Lens

One of the Report's purposes is to provide a “theological lens” for the compilation of a “thoroughly orthodox Prayer book”. [This gives rise to one of the chief confusions of the Report's layout. The section that seems to provide this “theological lens” is rather misleadingly titled “An expanded explanation of our guiding principles [for prayer book revision]” (pp 2-5), which were summarized in six points on the first page. In fact, however, the “expanded explanation” of these six “guiding principles” is found on pp.9-10, where it is called an “exegesis” of the six principles. What is found on pp. 2-5 is instead a kind of catechesis of the theology of worship.]

This beginning from the theological is very welcome. Only by a careful consideration of the Biblical and Historic Faith can the right perspective be attained in

which to make decisions about Christian worship. Moreover, such a theological approach to Worship would provide an excellent basis for catechesis, and serve to knit together the varied liturgical customs of the A. C. N. A. members. Though what is set forth in this section is generally very good, it is incomplete, and there are some serious weaknesses.

The fundamental structure of this “Theological Lens” or Catechesis is Trinitarian and Creedal. Unfortunately Sections I-III, dealing with the nature and purpose of worship, are rather sketchy, underdeveloped, and disorganized. They would benefit enormously by beginning from the person of the Father within the Trinity, and treating in a more organized fashion the work and order of Creation, the Fall, and the promise and pattern of Redemption set forth in the Old Covenant, as these concern worship. It is strange that the Fall is referred to a number of times, but never itself discussed directly, nor is the consequent distortion of worship into idolatry explored. The report might properly have taken a hint from the canticles *Venite, Te Deum Laudamus, Benedicite*, and *Sanctus*, with their rich treatment of these themes of creation of the world and election of a people for the worship and service of the Creator. (Indeed the whole of this section of the report would be strengthened and enriched by reference to liturgical texts of the Anglican tradition.)

The Catechesis concerning the person and work of Christ is more thorough, and is particularly clear that by means of his atoning death and renewing resurrection, he brings our humanity into the presence of the Father, and makes the worship of the Church on earth a participation of the worship of heaven. Curiously, there is no account of his coming again in judgment. Given the importance of eschatological perspective in the theology of worship – and the role of quasi-Marxist this-worldly eschatology in contemporary liturgy and revisionist theology – this is a surprising oversight. Surely this needs to be set right.

A clearer eschatological frame would also strengthen the section (V), “the Holy Spirit and the Church”, by setting its (rightly Christocentric) account of the work of the Spirit in a more specific relation to the unfolding of the Father’s plan of salvation and its consummation in Christ’s coming again. Unsurprisingly, this section has no treatment of the “last things”, and thus the final opportunity is lost to set the theme of God’s love (and man’s participation in it) in relation to judgment. Although the topic of grace is touched on, the opportunity is not taken for a restatement of the Church’s historic teaching on sin and grace (which historically has been so important in Anglican liturgy).

More surprising, one of the weakest sections is that on Scripture (VI). It is a curate’s egg of a section – good in parts. On the good side it begins well, with the affirmation that Scripture is “God’s Word written, the authoritative witness to God’s saving words and deeds in the history of Israel”(etc.). It also ends well with an emphatic

endorsement of the authority of Scripture. In between, however, the content of Scripture is described chiefly in rather moralistic terms (“God’s directives for humankind”, “how to behave toward God, our neighbours, and community”). Whatever happened to the gospel? In Section VII, “The Catholic Faith”, the topics of grace and scripture are both discussed – but not in relation to each other. Rather than hearing anything about the promises of grace set forth and offered in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are told only that the Bible “both convicts of our sin and provides guidance in fulfilling God’s will”.

As one might expect from the sketchy account of the Old Covenant given in I-III, the account of the relation of the Old Testament and the New is also disappointing. It falls far below the standard set by the 7th Article of Religion, and even the account of the Old Covenant’s relation to the New in III.4. According to the Article, “The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ”. This classical Christocentric and salvific understanding of the whole of Scripture does not appear. According to Section VI.2, “the Old Testament is “the record of the revelation of God’s interaction with the world and humankind, especially the people of Israel” whereas the New is “an historical record of God’s presence among us in Jesus the Christ, and those who followed Jesus”. These are statements of a sub-Christian vagueness that would fly well in the Episcopal Church – but surely we expect more from the A. C. N. A.

The whole of this “Theological Lens”, moreover, touches only lightly and implicitly on the implications of what the Church believes for how it worships. These implications need to be drawn out more clearly and fully (a model of how to do this – from a rather different theological perspective – is found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church 1077-1112, “The Liturgy-Work of the Trinity”) for the transition to the next part of the Report – an account of Anglican worship and the “exegesis” of the “six guiding principles” for prayer book revision – is rather abrupt, and how the latter follows from the former is far from clear.

Anglican Worship

The account of Anglican worship (pp 6-8) begins where it should, in the distinctive quality of classical Anglicanism as “Reformed Catholicism” (as articulated by Jewel and Hooker) arising out of the common ancient catholic tradition as received in the British isles and sharing a common doctrinal orthodoxy with the continental reformers, but doing so with a higher degree of authority granted to the Church Fathers and historic patterns of liturgy and ministry.

Its treatment of the Prayer Book, the Articles and Homilies, is cursory and lacks specificity. Here and elsewhere one senses that the Task Force was in a hurry to reach its pre-determined practical recommendations and cannot be bothered to think through

the basis of those recommendations carefully and patiently. Yet a careful assessment of the character of classical Anglican liturgy would be an excellent basis for thinking about how to extend that in the present day. (And like the Theology of Worship would be an excellent basis for Catechesis.) Besides one passing reference to them as “standards” there is little about them as doctrinal Formularies setting forth and shaping the mind of Anglicanism. There are a couple of minor mistakes (the 1559 BCP did not restore “many aspects” of the 1549 BCP but very few; the 1662 Prayer Book was replaced in the USA in 1789, not 1928). In a report of the Anglican Church of North America the failure to acknowledge the 1962 Canadian Prayer Book as one of the successors to 1662 is unfortunate.

Finally, it treats of the late modern developments which have undermined the “hegemony” of the Prayer Book: evangelical, catholic, charismatic, and “missional” agendas (about which little is said); modernization of liturgical language; the drives for inculturation and ecumenical convergence. The last three – language, inculturation, and ecumenical convergence – are the focus of considerable, albeit disjointed and sometimes tendentious discussion, which continues in the remainder of the report. Oddly enough, however, there is no one locus for the discussion of language, despite the Report’s evident interest in the question.

The section on Inculturation notes the translation of Bible and Prayer Book into local languages, and the breaking with British forms of “etiquette”, music and gesture, sometimes perceived as obsolete or colonialist. It also notes the danger of inculturations degenerating into syncretism in the Third World, and panentheism, or universalism in the West. And it rightly raises the question, how Common Prayer can be common when diversity is the rule, not only in language, but also in text and form.

The section on Ecumenism notes the spate of recent liturgical revision driven by desire to revive the practices of the Early Church as well as to correspond more closely with one another, and asks the very good question how this move to a more universal liturgy can be reconciled with the historic identity of the Prayer Book tradition. These are excellent points, and deserve the fullest discussion.

Guiding Principles for Anglican Worship

The Report discerns six principles for Anglican liturgy in Anglican history: four of them identified by Cranmer’s “inspired genius under Divine Providence”; the fifth by modern liturgists (not similarly distinguished); and a sixth arising out of the experience of liturgical revision. These are:

The Liturgy should be:

- A. Grounded in Scripture
- B. Respectful of the Tradition of the Undivided Church where this is not contradictory to Scripture
- C. Edifying to the people – by using language and ceremonies “understood of the people”
- D. Permissive of cultural variation not contradictory to Scripture or Creeds
- E. Ecumenical rather than distinctively Anglican
- F. Evolutionary in development [rather than revolutionary (as in recent liturgical revision)]

Although these principles are abstracted in part from a high valuation of Cranmer’s Prayer Book and a critical assessment of the experience of liturgical revision, paradoxically their “exegesis” moves away from the Prayer Book.

A “Holy Scripture must be the foundation of all Christian worship”

Overall this is well-handled, aside from quibbles about wording. Liturgy should rehearse the Biblical story, make use of Biblical language, and nothing in it should contradict the doctrine of Scripture. One translation should serve as the standard for all liturgical texts (with RSV, NKJV and ESV suggested) to encourage the memorization of Biblical texts. The one exception is A.3, which requires that “words and concepts, metaphors and images, used in common worship should be as close to *direct quotations* of the Holy Scriptures as is *grammatically possible*” (emphasis added). Even as Scriptural a text as the Prayer Book rarely relies on “direct quotation”, without allowance for literary beauty or theological clarity.

B “Tradition is to be carefully respected, especially the worship practices of the Undivided Church, as long as they do not contradict Scripture”

While the general statement is reasonable, the “exegesis” is problematic. The assumption promoted here is that “the 16th-century Reformers attempted to return to the practices of the Early Church in their liturgical revision, but were hindered by a lack of primary resources”, whereas “scholars today have much more direct access to the primary sources of the liturgies of the Undivided Church, and are not hindered (as much) by the polemics of the 16th century; therefore they can provide us with more authentic resources from which to draw for our contemporary liturgies”. This assumption is only partly true. Cranmer, no mean patristic scholar, certainly had access to some primary sources. But his use of them was qualified, not only by the criterion of conformity to Scripture, but also by respect for what the Report calls the “evolutionary” principle – that is, seeking to maintain the highest degree of continuity possible with post-patristic development. For the Reformers, the practice of the Early Church was never treated as antiquarian abstraction, but to be applied in the changed circumstances of the early modern church.

The principle that early tradition trumps later developments is the one that underlies recent liturgical revision, and is used (since the 1958 Lambeth Conference) to justify the abandonment of the Prayer Book tradition as the starting point for liturgical revision. Thus in the name of an antiquarian abstraction of “Tradition”, the *actual* tradition of western Christianity and Anglicanism in particular is abandoned. This tension between respect for the Early Church’s practice and respect for the Evolutionary principle needs to be addressed.

C “Edification means that language must be understood by the congregation, and that the ceremonies should be correspondingly relevant to them”.

Here the Report rehearses uncritically and unreflectively the standard polemic against liturgical English: “archaic language can become idolatrous if it gets in the way of common comprehension, or when it is valued more for its beauty than its content”. Since this can be said of *any* form of language, it is not in fact a helpful argument. “Language is constantly changing, only “dead” languages like Latin or Archaic [*sic*] Greek do not change because they are no longer spoken; therefore for a language to remain understandable it has to constantly “morph”[*sic*], i.e. [*sic*] thee/thou used to be an intimate form of address, now it is only used in a formal manner towards a “distant” God”. It is hard to take seriously views on language which are expressed in so illiterate a fashion. And the thinking is as sloppy as the writing. A language that indeed was “constantly morphing” would be a Humpty Dumpty language, almost incomprehensible to many if not all. Comprehensibility requires a delicate balance of the changing and the unchanging. And the degree of change naturally depends upon the particular purpose of the language involved. One might argue, or at least consider the possibility, that the doctrine of a changeless God demands a sophisticated and subtle language that has a relatively low degree of change. One might also consider more fully, whether the intimacy implied by the use of the second person singular, has a theological value which cannot be replicated in contemporary idiom. Here and elsewhere, rather than the careful discussion of the question of liturgical language which a religion of the Bible and of the preached Word deserves, the report addresses the questions in a fashion that is tendentious and polemical.

D “Ceremonies do not have to be identical across nationalities and cultures, but they must also not contradict Scripture or the Creeds”.

Here also, the detail is disappointing. Once again, the report imports polemic against the historic Prayer Book without comment or evidence. Thus, “an important question for liturgists today is whether 16th-century English Court rituals are still appropriate for the informal and egalitarian society admired in the West”. Really? What are these “English Court rituals”? Even more bizarre is D. 3 - whether the Church year should be revised to reflect the southern as well as northern hemisphere. “Should there be a

universal calendar for all circumstances?” One might ask why the Anglican Church in *North America* should be broaching this question, and why the question of universality should be raised in explanation of a principle about diversity. It does however at least point to the question which this should have addressed at this point – how the tension between this principle (local variation) and the next (ecumenical convergence) is to be resolved.

E “Words and liturgical forms should correspond to what the catholic faith has always taught and practiced (i.e. Vincentian canon) and emphasize our closeness to other Christian Communion rather than our uniqueness (ecumenical convergence vs. ecclesial divergence”.

F “”Words and liturgical forms should show a continuity with the Church’s historic tradition; change and development should take place in a way that creativity and innovation do not undermine either the orthodoxy of the liturgy or confuse the piety of the people”.

In a moment of disorganization, the sixth principle (evolution) has been subsumed under the fifth (ecumenism). Yet the opportunity presented by this close conjunction to discuss the tension between them is not taken. Ecumenical convergence militates against Anglican distinctiveness in liturgy; the evolutionary principle preserves them. How then are these principles to be consistently and coherently applied?

Instead of a discussion of this interesting and important question, we get another argument about language. First, it acknowledges that the BCP and KJV “still resonate in modern British and American speech” – could someone tell this to the author of C? However, the report continues, “because they are so closely identified with monarchy and the C of E, many other non-Anglican liturgies have avoided using these texts; in particular, the ICET sought to establish a new standard of modern English texts that would be acceptable to most other Christian Communion (and consciously avoided Cranmerian language). Which should we use today?” It should be noted that ICET texts have come under heavy criticism from within the Roman communion, and that much more accurate translations of the Latin originals are well advanced in preparation, which may well alter the standard common texts substantially. So much for ecumenical convergence! Moreover, one must really question an ecumenism which chooses a rootless abstraction rather than combining the treasures of each communion. Is this really what ecumenism is about? One might also note that earlier in the 20th century, non-Anglican communion (including the Roman) that produced English liturgical books (English missals) made use of the liturgical English developed in the 16th century. The notion that a bland ecumenical mush is the best idiom for the expression of catholic unity surely bears close scrutiny!

Along with the question of ecumenical texts, this section also raises for discussion the idea, noted above, that common shape rather than common texts mark the ancient

liturgies and should mark modern ecumenical liturgies. (The difficulties with this were partly noted in the section on Inculturation.) Thankfully these ideas are raised as questions for discussion rather than as conclusions to be jumped to.

Recommendations for the immediate future

In the last part of the report appear recommendations for the immediate future.

Once again, sadly, we get questionable polemic against the Prayer Books of 1662, 1928, and (mentioned here only) 1962. “Both [1928 and 1962] can become obstacles to modern comprehension because of their 16th century language and limited acknowledgment of new approaches to sacramental life.” What these “new approaches” might be and what their value is is not specified. Nor is the question of what is involved in comprehensibility discussed. Here and elsewhere the notion is simply taken for granted. Unexamined prejudices are defended with polemic not with evidence or argument, and there is no consideration of countervailing arguments.

Second, there is a critique of excessive and confusing options in modern-language service books.

Third, revision of the 1928 BCP and the Anglican Service Book is ruled out, rather summarily, though the question of their present status (and that of 1662 and 1962) is left in limbo). “Since those who prefer Cranmerian language are already using either the BCP 1928 or the Anglican Service Book, there is no reason to publish yet another traditional language book”. This is highly arguable. Even those who value the 1928 Prayer Book would like to see some minor and non-controversial improvements: the revision of the 1928 and 1943 Daily Office Lectionaries (perhaps following that of the 1962 Canadian Prayer Book); the selection of additional occasional prayers at the Daily office and Burial of the dead; logical ordering of the Visitation of the Sick and the Burial of the dead; the return of the Creed the Baptismal rite, and restoration of the missing adjective “holy” to the Nicene Creed replaced. Many Canadians would like to see the full form of the General Confession at Holy Communion restored.

The Report concludes that a Prayer Book for the ACNA “should be in modern language, with few variables, and closely relate to the classical BCP texts”. Although the 1979 BCP was a “self consciously revolutionary composition”– albeit “with some redeeming characteristics” (again unspecified, although perhaps it means the Holy Week and Ash Wednesday liturgies)- and since most Anglicans under forty only know the contemporary language rites of the 1979 BCP, this language should be adopted in the ACNA prayer book. This is a serious argument, based on the importance of liturgical memory, and one that Cranmer himself would recognize, even if he did not altogether

agree with its application. It is odd, however, that the Rite I version of the classical Prayer Book is chosen as the starting point for revision. With its mutilated texts (the Prayer of Humble Access) and its ersatz Eucharistic Prayer B, it is a dubious beginning point – already at one remove from “the classical BCP texts”.

Conclusion

However incomplete, the Initial Report brings into view what will be needed in its next Report.

1. Clearer, simpler organization of the text (Parts with numbered paragraphs is plenty).
2. A more complete treatment of the Trinitarian theology of worship, with careful attention to:
 - a. The person and work of the Father
 - b. The work and order of creation
 - c. The fall and original sin
 - d. The plan, pattern, and preparation for redemption in the Old Covenant
 - e. Christ’s coming again in judgment
 - f. The doctrines of sin and grace
 - g. The witness of the Scriptures to the gospel
 - h. The Word and Sacraments as means of grace
 - i. The last things
3. An examination of the ways in which the Faith has and should shape the Church’s Worship
4. A fuller assessment of the classical Anglican liturgical tradition as the starting point for the production of a new Prayer Book for ACNA.
5. A balanced and non-polemical discussion of liturgical English
6. An exploration of the tensions arising between the principles of liturgical diversity, ecumenical convergence, and evolutionary development
7. An evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the 1979 Prayer Book (and in Canada, the BAS 1985) in relation to the tradition of the classical Prayer Books
8. A treatment of the present and future place of the existing Prayer Books of 1662, 1928, and 1962, in the A. C. N. A.