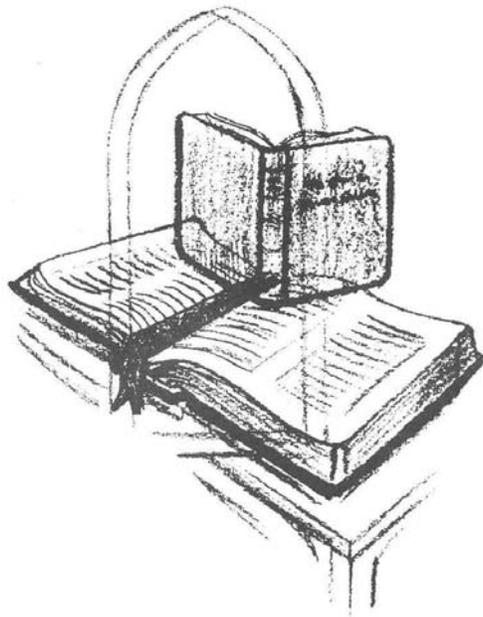


The Book of Common Prayer

Bishop Charles Edward Cheney

One of the founders of the Reformed Episcopal Church and the first Bishop consecrated in the Reformed Episcopal Church.



This article on the Reformed Episcopal Book of Common Prayer refers to the traditional BCP, not the revised version of the latter part of the twentieth century. Unfortunately that revision incorporated many of the very items that the learned Bp. Cheney abhorred.

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THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

Among the external characteristics of the Reformed Episcopal Church none attracts more attention than the fact that we worship with a liturgy or precomposed form of devotion. Just as some feature of face is more quickly noticed than a more important and vital trait of character so does our prayer book Worship more readily arrest attention than our doctrinal principles.

For four hundred years a controversy has agitated the Protestant Churches regarding set forms of prayer. But ancient as the discussion is, it has not died of old age. It is a living question today. Like many other debated points, it has not always been discussed with a large-minded fairness or Christian temper. May moderation and sincerity feature our consideration of it.

I. WHY DOES THE REFORMED EPISCOPALIAN EMPLOY A PRAYER BOOK IN PUBLIC WORSHIP?

The rock on which the Protestant builds is the Word of God alone. To that supreme test we must submit. Hence if a liturgy employed in public worship is clearly inconsistent with the Bible, the sooner we reject it the better.

It must be a hasty glance which we give at the past history of God's people but it certainly will shed some light upon the vexed question of liturgical worship. When God had delivered Israel at the Red Sea, the rescued people engaged in a solemn act of worship. Moses and the men of Israel sang a chant of thanksgiving (Exodus 15). But Miriam and the women take up the burden of the same words and sing them responsively. It is difficult to see how such worship could have been conducted without some prearranged form.

Again, in the sixth chapter of the Book of Numbers God speaks to Moses and gives him this direction, "Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them . . ." Then follows a long and elaborate benediction of which every word is precomposed and prescribed.

In the tenth chapter of the same book Moses is described as using a set form of words whenever the Ark of God led forth the people and whenever it rested on their march.

Four hundred years later we find David using a form of worship: when the Ark, after a long captivity, is brought to Jerusalem (Psalm 68: 132).

When Solomon offered his solemn prayer at the dedication of the Temple he used the very language prepared, and written by his father David in the preceding generation (compare 2 Chronicles 6: 41 with Psalm 132: 8, 9).

But why go back to a period so remote? Twice over, did Jesus give to His disciples what we call the Lord's Prayer. It was in response to their appeal, "Teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples."

No one believes that the Jews who followed Christ were strangers to the act of prayer. They clearly meant to say that John the Baptist had taught his disciples some form of supplication adapted to their needs under his preparatory stage of the Kingdom of God. And now Christ's followers ask for a form of prayer that shall be an advance upon John's — a distinctively Christian prayer. And with that request the Saviour complied. He not only said, "After this manner therefore pray ye" (Matthew 6: 9), but

also, "When ye pray, say" (Luke 11:2) — thus giving them a liturgical form. Surely we need no stronger evidence that a form is not out of harmony with either the Old or the New Testament.

But another reason impels the Reformed Episcopalian. A responsive form of worship is a continual protest against a ministerial and priestly monopolizing of the public service of God. It is an easy way to rid one's self of all business cares to sign a "power of attorney" by which a man divests himself of his own personal rights and transfers his individuality to another.

That act in the sphere of religion constitutes the Roman Catholic idea. The rights, responsibilities, and duties of the laymen are transferred to the priest. All religious worship centers in the celebration of the Mass. It is not needful that any beside the priest should be present. The people have in it no necessary share.

When the Reformation came its leaders were quick to see that one of the most effective means to secure to the laity a recognized place in the Church was a responsive liturgy.

Luther prepared a form of worship for Germany. The Moravians possess and use today a service book dating back to 1632. Calvin was among the earliest to perceive the importance of a book of common prayer and himself gave a liturgy to the churches of Switzerland. Even the Presbyterians of Scotland in Reformation days did not wholly depart from the principles of a prearranged mode of public worship.

In England a Scriptural prayer book was felt to be the first essential step toward giving the layman his Christian rights. Cranmer and his fellow workers called to their aid the great lights of the Reformation in other lands and with their help laid in the English Church the deep foundations of liturgical worship. But in every case the underlying principle and the impelling motive were the same. It was the conviction that nothing can guard the rights of the Christian layman against priestly encroachment like a form of worship in which the people have their necessary share.

Moreover, a liturgy possesses a unique teaching power. One can always discover a man's doctrinal views from his prayers. Precomposed or extemporaneous, a prayer is like the coin bearing the image and superscription of the mint in which it was stamped. Consequently prayer is a powerful doctrinal teacher. The public worship in a congregation is continually teaching either falsehood or truth. But extempore prayers of necessity change with every alteration in the belief of him who leads the worship.

The manifest advantage of a precomposed form is that it steadily and persistently teaches the same truth. And in the Reformed Episcopal Church The Book of Common Prayer is a consistent teacher of evangelical truth — the truth of the Word of God.

II. WHAT IS THE PRAYER BOOK OF THE REFORMED EPISCOPAL CHURCH?

The impression has been created that ours is a new liturgy, sprung upon the world like a fresh discovery in nuclear physics. If such were the case it would justly prejudice the Christians against it. For a prayer book must be the product of the ages. There is a reverence in the prayerful disciple of Christ which leads him to feel that if he is to worship in the use of forms of prayer they must be those in which the penitence and praise, the hope and faith of ages past have found expression. Precisely such is the

prayer book of the Reformed Episcopalian, a volume based on the second prayer book of Edward VI, the work of the martyrs of the English Reformation. Ours is therefore an ancient form of prayer, parts of which have been handed down from the earliest ages of Christianity.

There is nothing in uninspired language that stirs the soul like the ancient hymn the *Te Deum* which opens with the words, "We praise Thee, O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord." It takes us back to the days when Christians, driven from the surface of the earth, met for worship in rock-hewn catacombs. It was this Christian hymn which was the first to be heard on the soil of this continent, when Columbus fell upon his knees and in the words of the *Te Deum* praised God for a new world.

The *Gloria in Excelsis*, the opening words of which were sung by the angelic choirs when Christ was born, has voiced the praise of believers for at least twelve hundred years. The Apostles' Creed has been the outline of Christian doctrine accepted and repeated in worship from the third century. Nor is the Nicene Creed of much later date. Originating in the year 325 and put in its present form half a century later, its clear and trumpet-like tones have proclaimed the deity of the Saviour.

The great majority of all the brief prayers which are called Collects have breathed the pleadings of believers into the ear of God for more than twelve centuries. Surely, such a heritage consecrated and hallowed by the devotion of Christian ages and fragrant with the memories of saints in glory, is a possession which no true believer will despise.

When Henry VIII for wholly worldly reasons broke away from the Papacy, no attempt had been made to have throughout the English Church a uniform public service. There were different forms or "uses," as they were called, in different dioceses of England. But with Henry's death, his son, Edward VI, mounted the throne. It was like the young Josiah succeeding to the crown of his idolatrous father. Then came what may be called the first English prayer book (1549). It was the work of men educated in the Roman Catholic Church and just opening their blind eyes for the first time to the light. They saw "men as trees walking." No wonder that the liturgy they produced was full of the false teachings in which its compilers had been trained. No wonder that this first prayer book of Edward VI taught that the Lord's Supper was a sacrifice, the holy table an altar. No wonder that it permitted auricular confession and prayers for the dead.

Cranmer and his associates were all this time studying the Bible. Slowly but surely they came into the full light of the Gospel. Three years after the first prayer book of Edward VI was published they could not conscientiously use it, and in 1552 the second prayer book of Edward VI appeared. Strange as it may seem, that liturgy given to the Church of England when the Christian world was just emerging from its long night of Papal darkness, was the most truly Protestant service book that the English Church has ever possessed. It rejected superstitious ceremonies. It cast out the doctrine of the "real presence" in the bread and wine. It expunged the word "altar" as applied to the Lord's Table. It did away with auricular confession. And to the communion service it added the note which appears substantially in the prayer book of the Reformed Episcopal Church explaining that when we kneel at the communion, we mean no act of adoration of the elements of bread and wine.

No more than a mention can be made of the later alterations of the prayer book in the English Church. In 1559 Queen Elizabeth seeking to reconcile Roman Catholics in her realm had the aforementioned note stricken out. Under Charles no fewer than six hundred changes were made in the prayer, book, every one of which made it less and less the Protestant liturgy which Edward VI had bequeathed.

When the American colonies became a free nation, Episcopalians scattered throughout the land, without bishops and without a prayer book, adapted to the altered circumstances in which they were placed. In the year 1785 a convention of clergy and laity met in Philadelphia to organize the Episcopal Church in the United States. Its president was the venerable William White, afterwards bishop of that Church in Pennsylvania. Among its lay delegates were such men as John Jay, James Duane, Francis Hopkinson, and Charles Pinckney — men whose genius and patriotism made the Revolutionary period of our national history an era of surpassing splendor. That convention appointed a committee to revise the English prayer book. The result of their work was the prayer book of 1785. That prayer book is, in all essential features, the one adopted by the Reformed Episcopal Church and with which we worship today.

In all its distinguishing features it went back to the old Reformation work of 1552 — the second and Protestant prayer book of Edward VI. It left out all assertion of necessary regeneration in baptism, all suggestion of "real presence" in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper; it expunged the word "priest" and substituted "minister." In a word, it was a Protestant and evangelical liturgy from cover to cover.

But before 1785 Dr. Samuel Seabury of Connecticut — an extreme ritualist and high churchman — had failed to secure for himself consecration as bishop from the English Church. Its bishops had grave doubts whether he had ever been duly chosen to the office. Then Dr. Seabury appealed to the Scottish Episcopal Church to aid him. By that extreme semi-Romish communion, his secret election in which no layman had any part was accepted, and he was consecrated at Aberdeen as bishop.

But Dr. Seabury's consecration was given by the Scottish Episcopal Church with a purpose in view. It was followed by his solemn pledge that he would introduce into the American prayer book the idea of a priestly sacrifice in the Lord's Supper. That pledge he fulfilled to the letter. For in 1789, when the prayer book of 1785 had hardly come into general use, Bishop Seabury used his influence to overthrow the work of the first convention of the American Episcopal Church. A new liturgy permeated with the sacramental and ritualistic teachings of Bishop Seabury was adopted. This last, with revisions, is the prayer book of the Protestant Episcopal Church today.

The prayer book of the Reformed Episcopalian, however, is the old and original liturgy, published by the first convention of the American Episcopal Church, and on the ground of which its first bishops were consecrated.

III. HOW SHOULD THE REFORMED EPISCOPALIAN USE HIS PRAYER BOOK?

It is needless to say that he ought to use it intelligently. The best of tools may be worthless, and even dangerous, in the hands of the ignorant. The prayer book needs to be understood in order to be a genuine help to worship.

The Reformed Episcopalian needs to be an intelligent student of his liturgy because sincere Christians are frequently prejudiced against it. The believer who worships

with a liturgy should be able to defend it. He will find that many earnest but ignorant Christians believe the prayer book to be Popish. He will be told, "You worship with a book; so does the Romanist."

The answer is, that you cannot argue against what is good in religion simply on the grounds that a corrupt church employs it. On the same ground we might reject the doctrines of the atonement and the Trinity.

Nor is it true that the Roman Catholic Church has anything corresponding to our "common prayer." Her priests and her people have different service books. But any one book which requires concurrent worship on the part of the clergy and the laity is something unknown to the Roman Church.

We shall also find the objection that a liturgy inevitably produces formalism. We are told that a prayer book makes the worshiper a mere parrot-like employer of phrases to which he attaches no meaning. But the argument is childish. You may pour melted lead into a mold or let it flow freely out upon the ground. But it will grow hard in the one case as in the other. If a man loses his hold on Christ and ceases to seek sincerely for the power of the Holy Spirit, there will be coldness and spiritual hardening, deadness and formality, whether he prays extemporaneously or with a liturgy. Pastors of non-liturgical churches pray the same way, Sunday after Sunday, even though their prayers are not to be found written in a book.

Can any good reason be given against precomposed prayers which does not equally apply to precomposed hymns of prayer and praise? Well did old John Newton write:

Crito freely will rehearse
Forms of prayer and praise in verse;
Why should Crito then suppose
Forms are sinful when in prose?
Must my form be deemed a crime,
Merely from the want of rhyme?

Still again, prejudice charges that we indulge in what Christ forbade as "vain repetitions." But the intelligent, worshiper with a prayer book cannot forget that the Psalms of David, composed and used for public worship, are marked by precisely such repetitions. Nor did our Lord rebuke repetition in prayer, but "vain" or empty repetition. On that awful night of His agony in the garden He prayed three times that the cup might pass from Him, "saying," we read in Matthew's Gospel, "the same words." We need not fear formalism when following in His blessed steps. An intelligent use of the prayer book will prevent formalism in public worship because no Reformed Episcopalian can study his liturgy without perceiving that it is not a tyrant to enslave him, but a teacher to instruct him.

The Reformed Episcopalian should use his prayer book not only intelligently, but also *spiritually*.

In worship, whether extemporaneous or precomposed, we must give ourselves sincerely to it. We bow our heads in silent prayer when we enter the sanctuary. We ask that such absorption in worship shall be our experience. But how do we carry it

out? Some are in the habit of leaving the worship to their neighbors. Others respond to the Psalter but take no part in the Amen at the close of every prayer.

From the beginning to the end of the service the prayer book should never leave your hands, except in the Scripture reading. When you close it in anthem or in prayer, you lead yourself into temptation to wandering thoughts and set a bad example to those around you.

Not only so, but our very postures have their relation to our spiritual enjoyment and blessing in worship. To lounge indolently while God's praise is sung has but one meaning, when age or infirmity do not excuse it. It means that there is no praise in the heart.

Remember also that children can be trained to public worship in a liturgical service, as they, cannot be where all except the singing of hymns is extemporaneous. They have a right to the teaching power of the service. Its "line upon line and precept upon precept" can be interwoven with the earliest dawnings of childish intelligence. As parents lead their children to the house of worship and guide them in the use of the liturgy by their aid and their example they will learn to sing with Christians of all ages,

"Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ!

Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father!"