

The Great Commission, The Book of Common Prayer and Hearing from Old Books

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C. S. Lewis, in his introduction to an English translation of St. Athanasius' treatise *On the Incarnation (De Incarnatione Verbi Dei)* admonishes the reader to resist the temptation to read modern books only. A book written recently, says Lewis, is still on trial. "It has to be tested against the great body of Christian thought down the ages, and all its hidden implications (often unsuspected by the author himself) have to be brought to light." Lewis is working from the premise that we are fallible creatures and, left to ourselves (that is, if no outside voices are allowed a hearing) we will not only err individually we will also err collectively. Consider also the following three excerpts from this same introduction:

"The only safety is to have a standard of plain, central Christianity ("mere Christianity" as Baxter called it) which puts the controversies of the moment in their proper perspective."

"Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books."

"None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books."

This strikes me as terribly good advice which I might expand upon by suggesting that for the same reasons, the use of the historic Book of Common Prayer (i.e. 1662, 1928) affords us many of the same benefits. That is, the reasons that Lewis gives for the reading of old books is an argument which may also be applied to the use of the *old* liturgy over and against a modern one.

In other words, we do not advocate the use of the English Book of Common Prayer (1662) and its American counterpart (1928) owing to an antiquarian love affair with old English or a simple minded distain for the new. Rather, we contend for the use of the historic BCP owing to our conviction that the historic BCP contains and teaches true doctrine. We furthermore believe that the theology of the liturgy which one uses will shape one's understanding of and thus one's worship of God. Perhaps these seem the most basic and obvious of statements, and yet it seems to me that many well meaning and otherwise "orthodox" Anglicans act as though these statements were not true.

And thus, when we contend for the use of the historic BCP, we are not simply attempting to win allegiance to our favorite variety of prayer book. We understand ourselves to be acting out of obedience to such commands of our Lord as that of the Great Commission: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you . . ." (Matthew 28:19-20a).

When we consider first Jesus' commandment that His disciples should teach and obey right doctrine and then, the fact that the liturgy communicates doctrine, it becomes paramount that we use a liturgy that contains the truest doctrine available.

The liturgy is, inevitably, going to teach us doctrine and we are desperately in need of teaching that is removed from the errors which are particularly prevalent in this age. This is especially important in the areas of human sexuality and marriage. Let us thank God that the historic BCP challenges the prevailing spirit of our age in these areas (and more)!

Who can read *The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony* in the BCP 1662 and not be struck by the fact that it contains a different understanding of the nature of marriage than does the 1979 book written by the Episcopal Church USA?

Speaking now as a pastor, I must say that the use of that service has been and continues to be a powerful teaching tool in my ministry. It has been my experience, as a parish priest, that those whose understanding of marriage is shaped by modern thinking (as opposed to the teaching of the Scriptures and the Church) are positively *scandalized* by what that liturgy teaches about the nature of Christian marriage. For some, the offence of the historic BCP's doctrine of marriage results in the conclusion that they do not want a Christian marriage. It is always sad when that happens, but it is also appropriate. In such instances at least there is clarity as to what the Church says marriage is. Thankfully, however, it is not always the case that the initial scandal of our doctrine of marriage ends in that way. More often the doctrine of the historic BCP, after challenging presuppositions, awakens in the betrothed a godly longing that the vision of marriage set forth in the liturgy would characterize their marriage.

Such moments are, I think, examples of "the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds", correcting the errors peculiar to our age.

We are presently witnessing remarkable changes in the Anglican world. It is likely that more remarkable changes are coming. Some of these changes are good, others not so good. As Anglican clergy and laymen make decisions about how to move forward as faithful and orthodox Christians, let us not neglect our heritage. Let us be careful to consider our duty to teach and practice that which is consonant with reformed-catholic doctrine. And let us consider the importance of hearing from the "old books," that is, let us consider the importance of using and believing our historic Anglican liturgy.