Chapter 1

History of the Book of Common Prayer

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What Is the Book of Common Prayer?

The Book of Common Prayer, or simply the prayer book, is the name given by Anglicans to the principal liturgical resource that they use in the public (and sometimes also in the private) worship of God. As such it is not a single book, but a collection of different volumes that have emerged over time as successive generations and independent Anglican Churches have adapted them for their own use. Having said that, there is a definite family resemblance among them and a genealogy that can be traced back to the first prayer book, which appeared in 1549. Since that time, the book has evolved along different lines, which may be classified as follows:

The mainstream tradition. This encompasses the revision of the 1549 Book of Common Prayer that was undertaken almost immediately and led to a second edition in 1552. Within the Churches of England and Ireland the 1552 prayer book is the direct ancestor of all the subsequent revisions. The first of these occurred in 1559, the second in 1604 and the third in 1662. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer has remained the definitive standard in the Church of England and has been more widely influential in the Anglican world than any other version. In recent years it has come to be recognised as the 'classical' Anglican liturgy that sets the benchmark for all those that have followed. This is particularly important for matters concerning church doctrine, which often depend on the 1662 prayer book for illustration.

The alternative tradition. This also harks back to 1549 but treats it as an independent source of liturgy. One or two features of 1549 were

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incorporated into the 1559 prayer book, and thus became part of the mainstream tradition, but they did not affect its essential character, which was squarely based on 1552. The first liturgy that effectively bypassed 1552 was the Scottish liturgy of 1637. The 1637 prayer book was stillborn as far as actual use was concerned but elements from it were incorporated into the 1662 rite and it was also used for later Scottish and American liturgies. To this day, the liturgical tradition of the Scottish Episcopal Church and of the American Episcopal Church (with its various offshoots) descends directly from 1549 and is less influenced by 1552/1662 than are the prayer books of most other Anglican Churches, although this independence should not be exaggerated. It is only since 1911 in Scotland, and 1928 in the USA, that the prayer book of the Episcopal Churches in those countries has diverged significantly from the 1662 rite, and that is at least as much the result of modern liturgical studies as it is of any traditional adherence to 1549 or 1637.

The local adaptations. For the most part, these are translations of the 1662 book and/or modifications of it that have been made in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In England, 1662 remains the official standard and all subsequent liturgies are supplementary to it. Elsewhere, local Anglican Churches have been able to replace the 1662 book with prayer books of their own but, with few exceptions, these are mainly derived from 1662, which continues to form a backdrop to them.

Until the 1960s liturgical revision in the Anglican world was generally conservative and the 1662 prayer book was familiar, or at least easily recognisable, to the majority of Anglicans worldwide. In the past generation, regular use of the 1662 book has declined dramatically, even in England, where relatively few people now use it as the basis for their daily or weekly worship. Unfortunately, this change has led to a situation in which most Anglicans are no longer at home with one of the basic texts of their tradition, with the result that different branches of the Anglican world have become more distant from one another. The forces of liturgical 'renewal', often ecumenical in nature, combined with theological developments, and even (in some cases) a nationalism disguised as 'contextualisation' or 'indigenisation', have conspired to drive Anglicans away from 1662 and apart from each other. Many congregations have despaired of formal liturgy altogether and have composed their own services which may range from being some variation or combination of an approved rite or rites to a free pattern that may appear to be quite 'non-liturgical'. A simple return to 1662 is no longer possible and probably not desirable either. Modern traditionalists

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too easily forget that the 1662 prayer book was not universally accepted at the time it was produced, that pressure for revising it continued for some years and that it was largely because of the fear of further division, coupled with inertia, that it survived and dominated the field for as long as it did.

Today the seventeenth-century English attracts some but repels others, creating new fault lines that are difficult to overcome. It is hard to generalise but, on the whole, it seems that those who cling to the older forms of language are less inclined to appreciate the theology that the prayer book articulates, whereas those who would accept the latter in principle want to express it in more contemporary ways. Translated versions of the 1662 book escape this problem to some extent, because they are not bound to the forms of the original. A comparison might be made with something like John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which is readily available in modern English translations, but not in French ones. This is because Calvin wrote in both Latin and French, which makes it difficult to modernise the latter without running the risk of altering what he originally intended. The result is that French-speakers are forced to read Calvin in sixteenth-century prose, whereas English-speakers can make him our linguistic contemporary. Something analogous to this is also the case with translations of the 1662 prayer book; what sounds archaic to an English-speaker does not come across that way in other languages, which are free to update their translations as and when they wish. This is one reason why versions of the 1662 book used in parts of the developing world do not come across as 'old-fashioned' and the demand for modernisation is not felt as strongly as it can be in the English-speaking world.

Having said that, English remains the working language of the Anglican Communion, which means that the original text retains an influence that it might not otherwise have. This confronts commentators with a particular challenge. It makes no sense to study a modernised version of the 1662 text in detail, especially since the modernisations are not great enough to constitute a different language, but, at the same time, students must be alerted to archaic linguistic phenomena that may interfere with their understanding. This problem is compounded by different levels of education and exposure to the language. Native speakers who have studied classical English literature (like Shakespeare, for example) will not have the same difficulties as those who have not. Those who have mastered English as a second language may be perfectly at home in its modern form but unfamiliar with earlier stages to which they have not been exposed. There is a dilemma here that cannot easily

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or satisfactorily be resolved in a way that will satisfy everyone. The only practical approach for a companion of this kind is to stick with the original text and explain its difficulties as they arise, proposing alternative forms only when they are clearly necessary. This is not meant to encourage a kind of seventeenth-century fundamentalism that resists all change as a matter of principle, but rather to ensure that such changes as are made retain (as far as possible) the spirit of the original. It is with that aim in view that the present *Companion to the Book of Common Prayer* has been written.

Before the Reformation

The Jewish Legacy

The 1662 prayer book is the heir of a long tradition of worship that goes back to the earliest days of Christianity and, even before that, to the cultic practices of ancient Israel. In very early times devotion to God was associated with the prayers and sacrifices made by prominent individuals, notably, by the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They bequeathed the memory of their activities to subsequent generations but there was no official pattern of worship that the later Israelites were expected to follow. That did not emerge until the time of Moses and Aaron, respectively, the lawgiver and his elder brother, the high priest, who received detailed instructions from God about how the people should worship him. The bulk of these instructions focussed on what would later, in the time of King Solomon, become the Temple at Jerusalem. The first Temple, built in the tenth century BC, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC but rebuilt 70 years later. This second Temple became the uncontested centre of the Jewish world until it too was destroyed, this time by the Romans, in AD 70.[1] This was the Temple that we find in the New Testament, where Jesus preached and where his disciples, the first Apostles, worshipped. Even the Apostle Paul went to the Temple when he was in Jerusalem, which shows that that must have been a common practice among Jewish Christians as long as the building survived.[2]

Having said that, it is clear from the New Testament that Temple worship had been superseded by the coming of Christ, who identified

1. The Temple was actually completely rebuilt by Herod the Great (40-44 BC) but it is never referred to as the 'third' Temple.
2. Acts 21:26-30.

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his body with the Temple and interpreted its rituals as types of his own suffering and atoning death.[3] The destruction of the physical Temple therefore had little direct impact on the Christian Church, which had already incorporated its functions into its own spiritual life. Jesus Christ had combined in his own person the role of both the high priest and the sacrificial victim, thereby making atonement not only for the sins of Israel but for the whole world – past, present and future. What had previously been done once a year in symbolic form was now accomplished once and for all in eternity. There would be no more sacrifice for sin and no further need of a Temple or its priesthood. Instead of that, the Christian Church focussed its worship on remembering what Christ had accomplished and on bringing that home to those who wished to follow him. In this vital respect, Christian worship is quite different from its Jewish predecessor, although that difference has not always been appreciated in the way that it should be.

Many early Christians interpreted the Old Testament less as a historical prelude to the coming of Christ and more as a typological representation of his eternal sacrifice within a time and space framework. That way of thinking made it possible for them to assimilate their own worship to that of the ancient Israelites. As time went on, the Church created its own priesthood which mirrored, if it did not completely replicate, that of Aaron. The parallel was never exact and it took many centuries to develop fully but, by the time of the Reformation, there was a functioning priesthood that was physically distinct from the rest of God's people and that performed the main acts of worship on their behalf.[4] The memorial of Christ's atoning death had evolved into a re-presentation of his sacrifice, made possible by the 'miracle of the altar', which was the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the Lord's body and blood.

In this respect, the New Testament priesthood was considered to be far superior to that of the Old. Whereas the descendants of Aaron were forced to search for spotless lambs that could fulfil the sacrificial demands of the law, Christian priests were able to produce their own sacrifices by consecrating the sacred elements whenever it was necessary to do so. Far from being obliged to concentrate on an annual re-enactment of Christ's death in a single place, they were able to remember him on a daily basis wherever there was a venue suitable

3. John 2:19-22.

4. The Old Testament priesthood was vested in the tribe of Levi and inherited; but its New Testament replacement was sworn to celibacy.

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for the purpose. Interestingly, this did not diminish the sense of mystery that surrounded the ancient Temple rites but intensified it, by bringing the 'miracle' closer to the people and making it more readily available to them. However, equally important, this diffusion of the sacred did not necessarily bring Christians any closer to God. Many of them felt unworthy to partake of so great a blessing and actual Communion was usually much less frequent than it should have been. Leaving aside the priests themselves, most laymen partook of the sacrament only a few times a year at most. The Church tried to make Christmas, Easter and Pentecost (Whitsun) occasions when Communion was expected but, although they had some success with that, it was a far cry from the regular (weekly?) celebrations that we find in the New Testament.

The Reformers wanted to recover a sense of worship as the work of the whole people of God, rooted in the Old Testament as it had been fulfilled and superseded in Christ. That did not mean abandoning the Old Testament as Scripture, rather reinterpreting it in the light of the new covenant. Instead of concentrating on the ceremonial aspects of Israelite worship, which had been abolished by the coming of Christ, their focus was on the law and the prophets. The law was the moral and spiritual standard that God expected of his people, which was more important than ritual acts and even independent of them. The Old Testament is full of warnings about hypocrisy in worship and about priests who betrayed their calling by their inconsistent behaviour. That did not invalidate what they did in the Temple and elsewhere but placed it in context. The prophets reminded the people (and the priests if they were listening) what God required of them and pointed out that it was impossible to rise to His standards separately from repentance and the grace that would accompany that. If the Lord did not build the house, those who laboured at trying to build it were wasting their energy.[5]

It is essential to understand how the Reformers viewed the Old Testament if we are to appreciate the use they made of it in composing the prayer book. On the one hand, in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper they were extremely careful to emphasise the once-and-for-all sacrifice that Christ made on the Cross and that was not in any way re-presented or repeated in the Communion service. On the other hand, it explains their inclusion of the Ten Commandments, not in the shorter form known as our Lord's summary of the law but in the full text of Exodus 20:2-17, as well as their extensive use of prophetic texts in the call to worship at the beginning of the daily offices. Of the eleven Bible verses given

5. See Psalm 127:1.

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there, three come from the prophets (Ezekiel 18:27, Joel 2:13 and Daniel 9:9-10), four from the Psalms (51:3, 51:9, 51:17 and 143:2) and one from both Jeremiah 10:24 and Psalm 6:1. By contrast, only three are taken from the New Testament.[6]

The range of prophets cited reveals the importance that the Reformers attached to their oracles. However, there can be no doubt that the psalter claims pride of place in the prayer book's use of the Old Testament. Many of the suffrages (or intercessory petitions) in the daily offices are taken from it; and the entire psalter itself was assigned for monthly reading, a great increase on what had gone before. The Psalms had always been popular; but it was not until 1549 that they were included in full in daily worship and regulated in a way that provided for such frequent repetition. In earlier times the psalter had been used selectively and often thematically, and that tradition was not wholly eclipsed in the prayer book, as we can see from the inclusion of Psalm 95 in Morning Prayer and of Psalm 100 as an alternative canticle in Evening Prayer. However, what had been eclectic before 1549 now became systematic. Why?

The psalter was the song book of ancient Israel and of the Early Church. Frequent quotations from it in the New Testament attest to its familiarity. It stands out among the books of the Hebrew Bible for the way in which it expresses the entire range of human emotion in the worship of God. Many Christian commentators claimed that it was the voice of the incarnate Christ, who took on human flesh in all its dimensions, and that, in singing it, worshippers were uniting themselves with him. There is some justification for this in the way that Jesus used Psalm 22 on the Cross but this does not seem to have been the main motivation for the Reformers. What they wanted was to expose the Church to what they called 'the whole counsel of God', revealed in the Scriptures but put into the mouths of God's people in the Psalms. Only by becoming familiar with all of them would it be possible to absorb the fullness of the divine revelation, and this was the Reformers' guiding principle. So successful were they in this aim that in later revisions of the prayer book there was popular resistance to updating the psalter by providing a more accurate translation, such as was done with the Epistles and Gospels read on Sundays and holy days. Even in modern times, the pattern of the monthly reading of the Psalms and the desire to retain as much of the original translation as possible can still be felt in the prayer books

6. Matthew 3:2, Luke 15:18-19 and 1 John 1:8-9.

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that have supplemented and in places superseded the traditional Book of Common Prayer.[7]

The Early Church

The influence of the New Testament on the composition of the prayer book is most obvious in the Epistles and Gospels mentioned above and there is a tendency to present the biblical texts in some kind of order, particularly in the Sundays after Trinity that occupy roughly half the year. Portions of the Pauline Epistles from Romans to Colossians are read consecutively, and there are generous selections from Matthew, which was traditionally regarded as the first of the Gospels to have been written. By contrast, there is almost nothing from Mark, though both Luke and John are well represented. The Acts of the Apostles are also frequently found in lieu of an Epistle, and there are some selections from Revelation, though very few from Hebrews, which is surprising, given the liturgical relevance of that Epistle. These gaps were made up for in the lectionary, which covered almost all of the New Testament, but few ordinary worshippers would have been exposed to it because they did not attend church on a daily basis.

The most obvious use of the New Testament occurs in the institution narrative of the Lord's Supper, where a large part of 1 Corinthians 11, along with passages from the Gospels, are incorporated more or less *verbatim*. The canticles in Luke's Gospel also find a place in the daily offices, with the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc dimittis* being provided at Evening Prayer. By far the most frequently used New Testament text is the Lord's Prayer, which occurs, sometimes more than once (both with and without the doxology) in virtually every service in the prayer book. It is the ultimate call to prayer and reflects the petition of Jesus' disciples, who are recorded as having asked him how they should pray. In response, Jesus is said to have given them the prayer that we now use, though there is some indication from the shorter alternative found in Luke 11:2-4 that the Matthaean text represents a developed form designed for liturgical purposes. The presence of this version, complete with the doxology, in the *Didache*, a very early Christian manual that is almost contemporary with the apostles, reinforces that view.[8] Whether Jesus himself elaborated it, or whether his disciples put it together from

7. Some modern prayer books have replaced (or supplemented) the 30-day cycle with a 60-day one, but the principle remains the same.
8. *Didache* 8:2.

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