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TIME TO TAKE OFF THE BLINERS – DOCTRINAL DEFICIENCIES IN THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

By Revd John Cheeseman

The poor old *BCP* is in trouble again. Once more its doctrinal deficiencies are on the mat, but this time it seems that we've been indulging in theological gymnastics on its behalf. Curious? Then read on.

Do we in Church Society see ourselves as those who, in seeking to uphold the principles of the Reformation, wish to preserve at all costs the doctrine of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*? This certainly seems to have been the traditional outlook of conservative evangelicals in the Church of England. We who have been nurtured on Griffith Thomas and J. C. Ryle have been imbued with the notion that the *BCP* is a truly Reformed liturgy, despite the misgivings of the Puritans and subsequent nonconformist detractors.

I wish to challenge this position, and plead for a more honest and less blinkered approach to our Reformation heritage. While we thank God for the remarkable advances made by Cranmer, surely we have to admit that there are many statements in the *BCP* which the Puritans were quite justified in criticising. Let me list a few examples.

The retention of the word 'priest' is most unfortunate. It is no good arguing that for the Reformers this was synonymous with 'presbyter'. A liturgy should be plain and unambiguous. Otherwise doctrinal error is allowed to flourish. Witness the Oxford movement! Many of the statements associated with baptism are confusing, to say the least:

'Sanctify this water to the mystical washing away of sin'; 'Seeing now...that this child...is regenerate'; 'wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven'.

The usual response to all this is that if we invoke the rest of the *BCP* formularies, it becomes clear that no mechanical conveyance of grace is intended. The trouble is that the man in the pew tends to accept things at face value, without regard for the more subtle doctrinal nuances.

The 'prayer of humble access' in the Communion service smacks of medievalism: *'that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood'*. It is not surprising that the average Anglican communicant has an almost magical view of the Lord's Supper. Certain aspects of the liturgy tend to reinforce this conviction.

There are many other examples of ambiguous language that one could mention. Some would doubtless argue that the Bible itself is full of ambiguous language. 1 Peter 3:21 is often quoted in this context: 'Baptism, which now saves you'. However, the apostle goes on to say, 'not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience'. Would that the *BCP* was as unambiguous as the apostle Peter! And then we have John 6:54, where Jesus says, 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life'. Is this not ample justification for the so-called 'sacramental' language of the *BCP*. By no means. The context of John 6 is not the Lord's Supper at all. In verse 48, our Lord has said that *he* is the bread of life. The whole context is the need for a personal relationship with Jesus, by faith. Holy Communion is not on the agenda at this point.

Is it not high time that conservative evangelicals admitted the doctrinal deficiencies of the *BCP*? Instead of defending it by means of theological gymnastics, let us work and pray towards a truly Reformed liturgy which Bible-believing Christians can use with a clear conscience. Has not Church Society a role in furthering this aim? *[Editors note: Church Society published it's own Reformed liturgy in 1994 entitled 'An English Prayer Book.' This is now out of print but the entire contents is available for download on the Church Society website.]*

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