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# Liturgical change - tonic or toxin?

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The last few decades have seen dramatic changes in the liturgy of the Church of England. At the youthful age of 18 the Alternative Service Book is on its last legs and new services are coming to birth. Have the changes been for the better or for the worse? Should the new services be warmly embraced or sternly opposed?

### **Principled opposition.**

In 1945, towards the end of his trend setting work, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Gregory Dix took a pot shot at Evangelicals (whom he numbered then at 25 per cent of the Church).

To the framing of any new liturgy the Evangelicals would offer the most determined and conscientious opposition, not so much because they value the old one (which many of them disregard in different ways as flagrantly as any Anglo-catholic) as because it would mean admitting a change of some kind from what was customary a century ago.<sup>1</sup>

In the eyes of many this still characterises the outlook of some Evangelicals today. Commenting on Dix, Colin Buchanan described the attitude of Evangelicals in the post-war period by saying 'the conviction was deep upon them that all change was bound to be for the worse, and thus the very principle of change had to be resisted'.<sup>2</sup> However 'by 1970 Evangelicals had proved to the hilt that they wanted new rites and that the Dix' description of them just did not fit'.<sup>3</sup>

### **Embracing change.**

As far as Evangelicals were concerned, the main reasons for this development were the desire that they 'would have such language spoken in the Church, as they might understand, and have profit by hearing the same'<sup>4</sup> and further that, for the sake of mission, the Church should appear meaningful and relevant in the modern world. With regards the present revision 'the momentum for the revision of the ASB springs from a desire to have the best possible liturgy to meet the new evangelistic opportunities and pastoral challenges'.<sup>5</sup> Despite these desires, were the post-war Evangelicals right? Have the changes been for the worse?

### **Different agendas.**

Although the motives stated above are laudable there were other forces at work. The process of liturgical revision involved two types of change, change in language and change in theology. Thus shortly after the ASB was produced one Anglo-Catholic writer could say, 'The case to be made out is that the new services express better theology'.<sup>6</sup> Judged by the standard of the reformed doctrine of the Thirty Nine Articles there can be little doubt that the services of the ASB are far weaker. The problem was that when the ASB was being produced Evangelicals either could not prevent or could not see the nature of the some of the changes.

### **The results of change.**

Partly because of dissatisfaction both with the ASB and BCP many evangelical churches now stand very lightly to the official liturgies of the Church. In some cases this has led to positive fruit, in others Sunday services seem to consist of banal liturgy mixed with homely informality. Whilst this attracts outsiders for a while, and makes people feel more comfortable in church, those who wish to grow in grace find it a poor diet. After a while many feel that they must 'move on' to other forms of spirituality because the services neither offer solid doctrine nor the sense of reverence in worship that they once did. Public worship is often

reduced to the lowest common denominator of giving spiritual milk to spiritual children or of mainly addressing the outsider.

What has been the consequence of previous liturgical revision? Whereas many said that modern liturgy would make the church more relevant and therefore arrest decline or even boost membership the decline in church attendance has continued unabated for 30 years. Therefore, either modern liturgy has been a factor in promoting the decline, or, more likely, part of the outworking of the process that led to decline.

### **What should we do?**

This raises the question therefore as to whether Evangelicals should engage in the current round of liturgical revision trying to influence it for good, or oppose it tooth and nail because it represents the outworking of further theological drift. If Dix is to be believed, between the wars Evangelicals opposed tooth and nail, with some success, but not for long. According to Buchanan, later Evangelicals embraced change, but with hindsight it is hard to see that this has helped the cause of the gospel.

What happens with our liturgy is important, vitally important, but the real problem is far deeper. Although bad liturgy harms the Church the weakness of our modern liturgy is primarily a symptom of spiritual sickness - not the cause and certainly not the cure. Whilst it is important to get the best possible out of liturgical revision the real task lies in seeking to cure the spiritual sickness that besets our Church.

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### Endnotes:

1. G Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press 1945) p 720.
2. C Buchanan, *Evangelical Anglicans and the Liturgy* (Nottingham: Grove Books 1984) p 5.
3. ditto p 12.
4. Book of Common Prayer: Concerning the Service of the Church, 2nd paragraph.
5. General Synod Misc 459, Liturgical Revision 1995-2000 (General Synod 1995) p 1.
6. P Cornwell, *Church and Nation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1983) p 90.