

Article reprinted from Cross†Way Issue Spring 2004 No.92

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

REVISED ORDINAL

David Phillips

(Please note that in this article we understand the term Priest according to its proper etymology as the simple English rendering of the Greek word Presbyter.)

The last item in the revision of the Alternative Services Book (1980) is the Ordinal. The first public outing of the new services was at the February 2004 General Synod where it was given general approval. A revision committee will now consider the services in detail and the revised services will go before the Synod and the House of Bishops at least twice.

The Ordinal of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer remains the doctrinal standard of the Church of England and is not affected by this revision. However, the 1980 ASB services will cease to be used once the new services are in place and it is the new services that are likely to be used in almost all future ordinations.

The draft services are a fairly modest revision although a few of the changes are significant. As always there are also some small changes tucked away that reflect a shift from scriptural teaching.

The three-fold ministry

The most obvious change is in the differences between the services for Bishop, Priests and Deacons. There has been a deliberate attempt to put clear water between the three ministries and to make the three services distinctive. In the case of Priests and Deacons this reflects a widespread desire to re-establish a clear ministry of Deacon rather than just seeing it as a stepping-stone to being a Priest. However, it is the understanding of the role of Bishops and how the service reflects this that is of greatest concern.

The Church of England retains the historic three-fold order of ministry namely Bishops, Priests and Deacons. The clear distinction of three orders is not found in Scripture though it arose very early in the life of the Church and the seeds for it are evident in Scripture. The curious wording in the introduction to the 1662 Ordinal recognises that the three-fold pattern is not straightforward. Moreover, recognising that Scripture does not draw a distinction between a Bishop (episcopos) and a Priest (presbuteros) Anglicans have seen Bishops as Priests with a particular and wider area of ministry. The very titles of the services illustrate this point. In the Second Prayer Book of Edward VI (1552) Deacons and Priests are Ordained but Bishops are Consecrated. The 1662 book modifies the latter to 'Ordaining and Consecrating' and this was copied by the ASB1980. But, the new draft services use simply 'Ordaining'. This is not just a matter of words, the BCP reflects the fact that Bishops are not a separate order but are Priests who are set apart (consecrated) for a particular ministry. This is not peculiar to Anglicans but is also to be found in Roman Catholicism, including the Council of Trent. (You might reflect on the nature of calling as it relates to this. We are content for someone to feel called to be a Deacon or Priest, though this is tested by the Church, but what would you make of someone who as a young man claimed to be called to be a Bishop?)

It is not just the titles that draw the sharper distinction between Priests and Bishops but many of the expressions used. In particular the new services use far more language that expresses an apparent hierarchy of power. This is combined with a strong tendency in all three services to define each ministry in relation to the others. By contrast both the BCP and the ASB define the ministry far more in relation to the people of God and to Christ.

Truth and error

Another area of change, which is subtle but hardly surprising, is the commitment required of candidates to the truth of Scripture and to the refuting of error. At present Priests and Deacons have to declare that they will 'uphold the truth of the Gospel against error'. In the new service they are required to 'to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel'. Not only is this weak, it is pathetic when compared to what is actually expected of clergy according to our standard, the 1662 Ordinal. There they must declare that they will 'be ready, with all faithful diligence, to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's word..' This illustrates all too readily the failing and weakness of the Church today, even where the truth is taught few will also refute error.

It is in the rite for Bishops that the most noticeable change occurs in the new services. The ASB introduced the requirement that Bishops make the Declaration of Assent in the service. The liturgical commission proposed to remove this but surprisingly the Synod actually voted to throw out the change to the canon that would have facilitated this. Just as significantly it is proposed that the Bishop will no longer have to 'accept the holy scriptures as revealing all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ'. On the face of it this change is motivated by a desire to distinguish between the three different ordination services but even if this were the only motivation it is regrettable change.

The role of Bishops in refuting error is also lacking from the service. In the ASB the Bishop was to promise to 'guard (the Church's) faith' now, 'with their fellow bishops and guided by the Holy Spirit they are to be shepherd's of Christ's flock and guardians of the faith of the apostles...'. These are both feeble compared to the needs of the day or the commands of Scripture.

Symbolism

The other major concern before these services were produced was whether they would introduce a lot more symbolism. Symbolism is a concern because it tends to clutter the simplicity of the service (simplicity in worship has always been one of the hallmarks of evangelicalism) but also because the symbols invariably have some meaning or purpose that is antithetical to biblical truth. At present the introduction of symbolism is simply that they are permitted by the notes, however, it is quite possible that pressure will be brought to bear in the revision process to bring more symbolism into the main service.

Some other areas of concern:

- There is no confession in the service.
- There is no affirmation of faith in the service.
- One of the roles of Bishops is apparently 'interpreting the gospel'. This is both unbiblical and dangerous. Bishops like other Priests are to proclaim the gospel afresh in every generation but this gospel is perfectly understandable without their efforts to interpret it.
- Bishops are to be asked if they will teach the faith, but not now whether they actually believe it.
- In one of the Prefaces to the Communion prayer we have 'Your call is fulfilled in Jesus. Presented to you by Mary, he is your presence...'. If this refers to the presentation in the Temple it is defensible but misleading since both Mary and Joseph were present. If it is intended to mean more than that it reads like a Marianist blasphemy.

David Phillips is General Secretary of Church Society