

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Spring 2011 No. 120

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

REVISING THE BAPTISM SERVICES (AGAIN)

By David Phillips

Of all the services in Common Worship the Baptism service has proved the most unsatisfactory. This appears to reflect the confusion and diversity of views within the Church of England about the nature of baptism. The problem is no less acute amongst evangelicals. Some evangelicals are not paedo-baptist at all and this appears to be one of the main reasons why many good men are unwilling to go into Anglican ministry. Moreover, many reformed Anglicans, though convinced of the rightness of infant baptism have felt uncomfortable with the Prayer Book service and it is notable that though the Free Church of England, which began in the mid 19th century, retained the Prayer Book one of the few things they modified was the infant baptism service. In the Church Society bookstore we sell at least three books on infant baptism and they are amongst our best sellers, but all are written by American Presbyterians. They defend infant baptism from the standpoint of Covenant Theology, and do so very well, yet this is not the underlying rationale of our Prayer Book.

The problem with Covenant Theology is that infant baptism makes sense for children of believing parents, but as Anglicans we are required to baptise children when often we do not have confidence that the parent(s) are within the covenant community. This is a tension felt by clergy and laity alike and is part of the reason for the discontent amongst evangelicals about infant baptism. It leads to a curious situation in some churches where those on the fringe or outside the church bring their children for baptism whilst believers within the church do not.

When the Common Worship services were produced in 1995 the problems about baptism within the wider church came to the fore. The Liturgical Commission set about the service with a particular rationale but this did not find favour with the General Synod, as a result a Revision Committee, and the Synod itself (including the present author) changed the services significantly. The resulting service, authorised in 1997, was unsatisfactory to many people and is confused theologically. Before the remaining Common Worship services had been completed the Synod had already been asked to revise the Baptism service, and had done so with changes permitted in 2000. The discontent surfaced again in 2005 when further changes were made. Now, another six years on a third attempt is being made to revise the services and in February the General Synod agreed to proposals being brought forward.

As I see it the Liturgical Commission were attempting to do a number of things in the original drafts of the Common Worship service. I wrote about these in *Cross†Way* even before I became editor nearly 13 years ago. One feature was gender inclusive language as in all the Common Worship services. A second feature was to structure the baptism service to be like the Communion service. This is a story in itself because the shape of the Communion liturgy presupposes a much more catholic theology. The contrast between the Prayer Book baptism service and the Common Worship service, particularly the original drafts, is very marked. The Prayer Book service begins with exhortation, prayer, more prayer, scripture, exhortation, prayer, exhortation. There follows a profession of faith, the promises made by the child, with the godparents standing proxy, and then the baptism.

The Common Worship service contains very little prayer until the Prayer over the Water which assumes a similar function to the Communion Prayer. There was a clear epiclesis in the early drafts which we got removed at General Synod. That is to say a prayer is said calling down the Holy Spirit on the water (bread and wine at Communion) on the conviction that the water will be

sanctified and become the agent, *ex-opera operato* (working by itself) by which the child is regenerate. We got this changed, but the prayer still carries that intent even if the wording is now vague. Indeed there are four authorised forms of the Prayer over the Water and I understand that each can be used in a responsive form.

One of the changes requested at the General Synod in February is to the Prayer over the Water. The current complaint is that the language is too verbose and too theologically demanding. There is some merit in these arguments although the fear must be that an alternative form may end up being trite and so contemporary that it will soon be embarrassingly dated.

A second aim of the Liturgical Commission in producing the Common Worship services was to follow more closely ancient Christian practice. The affirmation of faith illustrates this well. As far as we can tell the Apostles Creed has been used as the Baptismal affirmation of faith in the Church of Christ for 1700 years or more. This changed in the Church of England in 1980 when a much weaker affirmation of faith was authorised. The Liturgical Commission deliberately, and in my view wisely, decided that this was unacceptable and so reverted to ancient practice. This has proved problematic to many. Whilst the Apostles Creed was clearly comprehensible to people of all kinds for 1700 years it appears that today there are so many in our churches who are being taught so badly, that they cannot understand or affirm what it teaches. Moreover, it has apparently proved too high a barrier for many bringing children to baptism. One of the early changes to the Common Worship service was to remove the requirement that the Apostles' Creed be used and replace it with a weaker affirmation of faith. It is worth remembering at this point that the ASB and CW both require that the parents and godparents make this affirmation in their own right.

Incidentally, the Book of Common Prayer does not require the parents and godparents to make such an affirmation. Cranmer's baptism service, like that of the Lord's Supper, appears to be rooted in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The child's baptism will be effective if the child truly has faith in Christ and it is the child who affirms their faith by the godparents, after the Creed has been rehearsed. This seems odd to our modern sensibilities partly because of the idea of proxy being less common, but it does make sense theologically since we are saying that the child is part of the people of God if the promises made in its name prove to be genuine.

The various declarations required of parents and godparents in the Common Worship service have proved a problem right from the outset. The original "Decision" beginning with "Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?" has a certain power and is based on ancient practice. But it is too forceful for many and was soon made optional. This is another area where people want to see change and again the pressure is driven by the conviction that we are asking people to believe too much, the questions are thought to be theologically too blunt and the wording does not resonate with ordinary people.

It is hard to know what will happen with all this. The Synod has passed a resolution calling for work to be done but that does not mean they will be willing to authorise what is produced. I disagreed with the original rationale for the Baptism service, but at least there was one and there appeared to be a coherent theology undergirding the service. But the present service has become incoherent theologically and is hard to explain. Moreover, many people just do not use it in any authorised way and so the practice from church to church varies widely. Many evangelical churches do not use the authorised service at all, or else they already adapt it significantly and we have encouraged such an approach in Cross†Way in the past because of the erroneous doctrine undergirding the original Common Worship service. Others have preferred to use An English Prayer Book published by Church Society in 1994. There are two services one of which follows the Book of Common Prayer but modifies the bits evangelicals have found difficult. At present AEPB is out of print though the text is on our website and we are investigating a reprint because of

continuing demand. Nevertheless, all this means that we have such diversity of practice in the Church of England that the use of “Common” in the title is entirely misleading.

The General Synod passed the motion in February, which requests the House of Bishops to request the Liturgical Commission to prepare some supplementary material. When that has been done it will go back to the Bishops and then to the Synod and will presumably require a Revision Committee. The resolution is seeking “additional forms of the Decision, the Prayer over the Water and the Commission, expressed in culturally appropriate and accessible language”.

David Phillips is General Secretary of Church Society