

Common Worship : Ordinal (GS1535)

The last item in the revision of the Alternative Services Book (1980) is the Ordinal that goes to the General Synod for a first look in February 2004. The Synod will be asked to hold a General Approval debate and, assuming approval is given, the services will be passed to a Revision Committee for detailed work with final approval being granted at the earliest in November 2004 and more likely in February or July 2005.

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.

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 straight-forward. 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 illustrates this point - Thomas Cranmer in the Second Prayer Book of Edward VI (1552) used the descriptions Ordering of Deacons and Ordering of Priests but the Consecrating of Bishops. In the 1662 BCP, which is substantially 1552, the latter title changed to 'Ordaining and Consecrating' which was retained in 1980 but is now replaced in the Common Worship service with simply 'Ordaining'. The sense of the BCP is that the primary act going on in relation to Bishops is that they are being set apart (consecrated) for a particular ministry. This is not entirely peculiar to Anglicans, it has been argued by Hans Küng no less that Vatican II did not draw a sharp distinction between Bishops and Priests and also that this was also acknowledged at the Council of Trent.

In my own view the new services, not simply in their titles, seem to heighten a distinction between Priests and Bishops and many of the expressions used tend in this direction. They give the impression that the Bishop is where the real action is and the Priest is somehow not quite there. This shift is due in part to the conscious decision by the Liturgical Commission to include more material specific to each order when compared to the ASB.

If asked beforehand what would be my greatest fears regarding the new Ordinal I would have had no hesitation in identifying two areas, first that the doctrinal commitment expected of candidates would be reduced and second that symbolism and extraneous rites will cloud the heart of what the service is about.

For Priests and Deacons the first fear is largely unrealised. They are still required to declare that they accept holy scripture as revealing all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. However, it is when it comes to error that the statements are weaker. The BCP has the marvellous declaration that ministers will 'be ready, with all faithful diligence, to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's word..' This was done away with in 1980 and apparently replaced with being willing 'to uphold the truth of the Gospel against error'. In the new services it is simply a commitment 'to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel'. This illustrates all too readily the failing and weakness of the Church today, even when the truth is taught it will rarely refute error.

It is in the rite for Bishops that the most significant changes occur. Most curious is the requirement that the Declaration of Assent no longer be made in public. This is the case already for Priests and

Deacons but it was a feature of the ASB based on the BCP that at a consecration all present were reminded of the doctrinal basis of the Church of England and the Bishop was publicly required to assent to this. It is now proposed that this be done in private. Sadly there has long been the suspicion that in making this declaration some Bishops must have had their fingers crossed since what they have gone on to teach is anything but in accordance with the declaration of assent. This change will require a change in the Canons and is the subject of what is called Amending Canon no 27.

Just as significantly the Bishop is no longer required to publicly to 'accept the holy scriptures as revealing all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ'. This appears to be driven by the desire to make the three services noticeably different but it is a regrettable change that will hopefully be reversed.

With regards to the role of Bishops in refuting error again the new services are sadly lacking and a clear weakening even from the feeble requirements of the ASB. Again the call to uphold the truth of the Gospel against error has been weakened but also in describing the work of a Bishop whereas in the ASB it is stated that within the Church they are to 'guard its faith' in the new services all we are told is that '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...'. This is feeble language when compared to the needs of the day or the commands of Scripture.

The second area of concern I identified had to do with symbolism and extraneous rites. By and large these are present by way of permission rather than prescription. However, there is likely to be far more fuss and clutter in the services which is so evident in most modern liturgy, away from the simplicity and scriptural focus of reformed worship.

It is to be hoped that during the process of revision it will be possible for some of these failings to be rectified.

A couple of further observations.

I am not sure why, or whether it is significant but at least in the new draft services the order of the three services is reversed, it is now Bishops, Priests, Deacons.

My overall impression is that the new services, particularly that for Bishops are more wordy than the ASB although I have done a count to confirm this.

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20 January 2004