

Why Liturgy?

David Phillips

There is an increasing trend in the Church of England, particularly amongst Evangelicals, to abandon the formal and official liturgies of the Church. Of course, where formal liturgy is not used an informal liturgy, that is a standard pattern and regular words, does usually develop.

What good reasons are there for following a formal and official liturgy?

To Teach

The liturgy no less than a sermon is a vehicle for teaching. There is a danger of service leaders muttering inane comments to link together songs and readings, or for the whole service to seem like one long sermon. Good, sound liturgy is both an aid to worship and the worship of God.

In Churches where the Bible is faithfully taught, liturgy will be a supplement to that teaching and a safeguard against

hobby-horse preaching and comments. It should cover a wide diversity of Christian doctrine.

In Churches where there is false or non-existent teaching a sound liturgy may be the only source of true teaching. This is why the Church of England needs good faithful liturgy. Books of Homilies have also been used in the past where clergy were ignorant

Cranmer's liturgy was written for a country where the majority of people could not read. With many inner city Churches facing this problem today the call is to produce short and insubstantial congregational parts. Cranmer intended that people learn certain texts by repeating each line after the Minister and by saying the same texts week after week.

To Prevent Error

When people make up their own liturgies not only is there a tendency to focus on their particular likes, they also ignore their dislikes.

Moreover it is easy to produce nonsense, or heresy.

Good liturgy will ensure that a congregation receives sound doctrine.

Common Prayer

Much is said about this and it is probably over-rated.

Bishops particularly find that they are required to take part in liturgies in different Churches with little or no commonality. For congregation members visiting other Churches it is helpful (though not perhaps as interesting) to

have familiar liturgy. This argument was previously used by the Roman Church to defend the use of Latin world-wide.

To Learn Texts

It is good to learn a store of texts, not just biblical texts but prayers that come to mind in times of difficulty or which can be said together.

It is an extraordinary experience to say the Prayer Book Communion service with a old person who can no longer read but knows it all by heart.

Having such texts readily stored up can be an aid in apologetics and evangelism.

Some have encouraged Christians to learn such texts in preparation for persecution. How would you cope if imprisoned without Bible or prayer book? What would come most readily to mind - 'If I were a Butterfly'?

God is a God of Order, not of Chaos

For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. (1 Cor 11.33)

Let all things be done decently and in order (v40)

These verses show the principle that underlies a formal written liturgy, it is to ensure that a service has order and decency to it. A formal liturgy does not prevent points in it being more informal, but it provides a structure and it also ensures that essential parts of a service are not lost, or down-played.

Cranmer's Liturgy

From 1552 until the 1970s, with only a few years interruption the staple liturgy of the Church of England was based on the liturgy of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (it was revised slightly up until 1662). Cranmer tried to weld together Reformed theology, elegant English and where possible traditional practices. His liturgy, was a beautiful masterpiece which perhaps more than anything else has defined the Church of England.

Earlier this century the Anglo-Catholic scholar Dom Gregory Dix (who is responsible more than anyone else for the liturgical changes this century), though critical of Cranmer's reformed theology, wrote:

Compared with the clumsy and formless rites which were evolved abroad, that of 1552 is the masterpiece of an artist. Cranmer gave it a noble form as a superb piece of literature, which no one could say of its companions; but he did more. As a piece of liturgical craftsmanship it is in the first rank - once its intention is understood. It is not a disordered attempt at a catholic rite, but the only effective attempt ever made to give liturgical expression to the doctrine of 'justification by faith alone'.

Gregory Dix : The Shape of the Liturgy p672 (Dacre 1945)

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