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ADAPTING THE NEW BAPTISM SERVICE

by David Phillips

WHAT'S WRONG

In this follow up article suggestions are made as to how the new Church of England Baptism Service could be adapted to make it more Anglican. This may seem a provocative introduction but many people are deeply concerned about the underlying theology of the new service believing that it does not accord with the doctrine of The Thirty-Nine Articles.

It is difficult to isolate particular problems because the whole thrust of the service seems wrong with a curious amalgam of theological positions. There is too little emphasis on the sovereignty of God or on the plight of man. Baptism is portrayed as the individual's response to God whilst at the same time making too much of the water and its effects.

A DILEMMA

Those who desire a contemporary language Baptism Service must either use an updated form of the BCP (such as *An English Prayer Book*) or adapt the new Common Worship service. However, this goes against the grain for many evangelical Anglicans. It is deep in the psyche that our 'yes' should be 'yes' and our 'no' should be 'no'. In the past it was others who twisted the plain meaning of the BCP and added to it in order to pervert its simple, biblical doctrines. Today younger evangelicals in particular stand light to both Canon Law and tradition but may live to regret doing so. The suggestions made here are therefore tentative but are made because some have asked for them and also because it should make it clearer as to where the deficiencies lie in the new services. Comments on these suggestions would be welcome.

PRINCIPLES

Although the 1662 Prayer Book is not pure Cranmer and some have reservations about some aspects of Cranmer's baptism service, the approach adopted is to utilise the approach of the BCP since this accords with the biblical doctrine of the Church of England. In particular this means that Baptism is treated as an 'effectual sign' (God really does something) but it is only effective when accompanied by true and saving faith.

DETAILED SUGGESTIONS

The current **INTRODUCTION** ascribes too much to baptism and makes no mention of faith. Making use of the rubric, *The president uses these or other words*, the following wording is based on the BCP.

Brothers and sisters, the Scriptures teach us that all people are born corrupt and

therefore by ourselves we cannot please God. Instead we live in sin and do many wrong things.

The Lord Jesus tells us, therefore, that we cannot enter the Kingdom of God unless we are regenerate and born again by water and the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, in this service we have come to call upon God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, so that out of his overflowing goodness he will give to *these people* what *they* cannot have either by nature or *their* own efforts.

The service should now move straight to prayer omitting the Gloria.

The rubric allows for '*a more specific bidding*'. The phrases of the bidding could be said with silence between each. It should be made clear that people are to pray.

Let us therefore at the start of our service pray to God that in accordance with his great promises he might look with mercy on those who are to be baptised.

Let us pray

- that God might be pleased to wash them and sanctify them by the Holy Spirit
- that they might be delivered from wrath
- that they might be received into Christ's Church
- that they might be firm in faith, joyful through hope and grounded in love
- that they might pass through the storms of this life and finally come to everlasting life, there to reign with God for ever.

The **LITURGY OF THE WORD** must provide for what is missing in this service, that is a clear setting out of the gospel. The main points from the BCP exhortation are all worth making.

- Christ's words that we must be born again of water and the Spirit
- Baptism is necessary
- Christ commanded it
- Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved
- Whoever does not believe will be damned (call people to believe, beware of trusting in the sign alone - it is faith that counts)
- The example of Peter - if you believe then repent and be baptised
- Save yourselves from this generation
- Baptism saves us by the resurrection of Jesus, not by what it does but because it is the outworking of our proper response to God.

Therefore the candidates:

- must repent
- must come by faith (without faith the sacrament works to our damnation - cf Article XXV).

We ask God for what he promises:

- remission of sin
- the Holy Spirit
- the blessings of eternal life
- to be part of his everlasting kingdom.

The following prayer is based on that in the BCP and can be used as a closing prayer for the sermon:

Almighty and everlasting God, our heavenly Father, we give you our grateful thanks that you have graciously called us to a knowledge of your grace and to faith in you. Increase this knowledge and confirm our faith. Give your Holy Spirit to those who

have come for baptism that they may be truly born again and become heirs of salvation, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.

For the **PRESENTATION OF THE CANDIDATES**, gather those to be baptised with their sponsors so that they are around the font.

The following words are suggested as part of the presentation:

You have come to be baptised. You have heard how we have prayed that the Lord Jesus would receive you and bless you, that he will release you from your sins and give you the kingdom of heaven and eternal life.

You have heard too the words of Christ from the Bible, where he promises the things we have prayed for. We may be assured that he will keep his promises.

But you must also now make promises for yourself, in the presence of (these witnesses and) the whole congregation. You must promise to renounce evil, to believe Christ's word, and to be obedient to him.

For their part this congregation will promise to help you in following Christ.

From now on the service should flow simply, all the extra parts (candles, clothing etc) serve to clutter the service and distract from its essence: God's promise and the candidate's response. Therefore the 'Prayer over the Water' should come immediately after the promises. (Remember that children are making promises by proxy through their godparents.) The effect of this is that the service goes from: 'I come to Christ' to 'Praise God who made heaven and earth', this can be said with gusto as a response to the decision.

The 'Prayer over the Water' is too prominent in the new service. Although an explicit epiclesis (calling down of the Holy Spirit on the water) was removed under protest the intention is still there. By keeping the service moving this part of the service takes a more suitable place. The wording 'sanctify this water ...' is to be understood biblically, that is the water is set apart for holy use, it is not made into holy water with special powers, it is not changed in substance, only in use. This fact is made clearer by a slight grammatical adaptation and intonation:-

Now sanctify this water, so that **by the power of your Holy Spirit** they may be cleansed from sin and born again.

The agent of re-birth is the Holy Spirit not the water.

The only other adaptation is that the signing with the cross may be used after baptism. There is no need to use water but an introduction may help; the cross is the recognized sign of Christ, those newly baptised are to be his followers. This act is therefore part of the **COMMISSION**.

CONCLUSION

The changes made have added significantly to the Service. There is more about the promises of God and much more prayer begging God to act according to his Word. The focus has also shifted from the prayer over the water to the baptism itself. The principal aim is to ensure that the focus of the service is on the grace and promises of God and the response to this of prayer, repentance and faith.

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