



Dr. J.I. Packer

Dr. J.I. Packer discusses with Julie Lane-Gay the significance of the Book of Common Prayer (1662) upon its 350th Anniversary. The renowned theologian calls the Prayer Book “the Bible orchestrated for worship.” This interview is published with the permission of *The Anglican Planet* where it first appeared.

How did the Book of Common Prayer first get your attention?

I was taken to church from an early age, and was thus reared on the 1662 English (Prayer) Book, but no one ever explained any of it to me. So Sunday worship by the BCP never meant more to me than regularly cleaning my teeth – a required routine which I was told was good for me. Most of the time I was thinking about something else. When I became a Christian, I was so cross with the Church of England for never having explained the Gospel to me properly that I spent a couple of years fellowshipping with the Brethren.

Then, slowly but surely, I became aware that Prayer Book services were celebrating the same realities that were now shaping my life and from that point on the Prayer Book has anchored itself deeper and deeper in my conscious life. It has anchored itself as an articulation of worship, celebration of the God of Grace, celebration of union with and life in Christ, and celebration of the quest for holiness, which God impressed on me from fairly early on in my pilgrimage, as a priority.

How do you use it now?

I have memorized most of the regular services. On Sundays I am a regular at the 7:30 am Holy Communion service at St John's [Vancouver], a service that closely follows the Book of Common Prayer. On weekdays, I aim to walk thirty minutes every day very early in the morning and I say Morning Prayer as I walk. That is quite distinct from the 30 minutes I then spend back in the house reading the Bible. I do not use the BCP in the evening because I am never at my best in the evening so I never plan to do any serious praying, or serious anything else, at that time. At night I do a ‘minimal signoff’ after the day's living, noting the mistakes I have

made that need to be forgiven and repented of and expressing thanks for anything particularly good that has come my way during the day.

If I wanted to integrate the BCP into my devotional time, how would you suggest I start?

I appreciate very much the wisdom and fruitfulness of building one's daily devotions on what is spelled out for you in the collect. The collects are brief and you get a different one every week. Pray through each one and reflect on it. Then I would say talk freely with the Lord about what is going through your mind, what you care about, things you are seeing, things you are becoming aware of – obligations, admonitions, encouragements, matters for thanksgiving. I don't think most of us do as much thanksgiving as we should – so when I am trying to help people get into the habit of prayer, I underline the fact that thanksgiving, and plenty of it, is necessary to a healthy Christian life – as the BCP shows.

What about the places where the Prayer Book says ‘minister’ or ‘leader?’ Do we say these parts to ourselves?

When you are saying the Office on your own, you become the leader. Then, I believe, you can properly say everything, including the absolution, to yourself and indeed need to.

What parts of the BCP are important to say with others?

The whole of the Daily Office – Morning and Evening Prayer both – is admirably angled for corporate use. Every bit of the service goes better when you are doing it with others. It is meant for ‘group work.’ Cranmer didn't know that language but certainly that is what he had in mind. He directed the priest to ring the church bell at daily service times in the hope that members of the congregation would come

and say the Office with him. I don't think that was simply because it would be of benefit to the members of the congregation but because Cranmer knew group worship honours God in a more robust way than solo worship can ever do. I believe that contemporary Protestant Christianity has become infected with the thought that set forms of liturgy are for personal use first and group work second. I don't believe that. I believe that in celebrating and glorifying God, group worship is primary. It certainly will be so in heaven and I think it is meant to be that way here on earth. I notice that the calls to thanksgiving in the New Testament letters are always plural. The whole Church is called to give thanks, and that I think is a pointer to the fact that group worship that celebrates the greatness and goodness of God is primary. Do we need the entire BCP or would abbreviated services work just as well? Using mini-versions of the set services may seem beneficial in the short run but actually becomes a real impoverishment in the long run. We ought to use the whole of the BCP as opposed to selections from it. Cranmer's architecture of services is masterly, and best not tampered with.

What about changing some of the words now and then in the Services?

One or two BCP words have changed their meaning over the centuries and that makes adjustment of them an advantage. But otherwise, by changing the words all that we do is put ourselves out of step with the BCP, and encourage ourselves to think, "We are a little wiser and more skillful than Cranmer was."

Well, are we? I am not so sure.

Some people feel the BCP is outdated and irrelevant. I don't think the BCP's Sixteenth Century ceremonial style of speech is as much a problem as is suggested. All that is needed is to sit people down and explain this language to them. If you want to know why it should be ceremonial – why ceremonial language is regularly used when you are making an address to a person of distinction such as royalty – well, we are addressing royalty when we're praying to our God. The idea that our Heavenly Father and our crucified and risen Lord are just good buddies is demeaning. It is inappropriate. The whole BCP is couched in this dignified ceremonial idiom, as are the hymns we sing, and I think this should be appreciated as making for reverence, rather than treated as some sort

of problem. I remember from my youth that in Anglo-Catholic churches sermons on Prayer Book themes and language were part of the regular fare. The purpose of them was to upgrade the quality of the congregation's worship. I think there was wisdom both in that purpose and in that practice.

What should we understand about the time in which the BCP (1549, 1552, 1662) was written?

When the BCP was born it had few rivals. There was no radio, no television and no regular public use of secular language of any sort dinning into people's ears. But each Sunday people attended church and heard the familiar services read. It is easier to internalize material when it is repeated stand-alone material.

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In what ways might Anglicans be missing some essentials by not using the BCP? Where are the big gaps?

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What do you say when people say they just don't feel the Book of Common Prayer is culturally sensitive?

I say that the BCP is culturally sensitive to all the really important facts of life: family, marriage, singleness, health – good and bad – and all the ethical Anglican Studies Programacts of family life. It is sensitive to the fact that community should be sought and practiced as a Christian duty. There should be togetherness, mutual admonition, forbearance, and unity in worship – part of the national church idea – which is part of the raw material of the Prayer Book.

Are there contexts in which the use of the BCP concerns you?

I don't think the Prayer Book is being well used when its contents, context and layout have not been taught. Like Christianity itself, the BCP

needs teaching. It doesn't come naturally to anyone, just as it doesn't come naturally to understand the Bible the first time you read it.

Is the BCP being taught much today in theological colleges?

It is hardly taught at all in theological colleges, so far as I know. What seminaries seem to do on both sides of the Atlantic is to survey and try out alternative forms of worship that the modern church has come up with and these get evaluated, rather than the BCP. If I were regularly leading worship these days, I would encourage the congregation to expect that every service – Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and Holy Communion – is going to be an adventure. It will be a route that we've followed before, no doubt, but when you take a walk through luscious woodland you never appreciate all of it first time around. The walk is one that you enjoy taking again and again and again because there is always something new to see and yet it is the same woodland and the same path. And what, as worship leader, I emphasized last time through isn't what I am going to emphasize this time. Also, I would always plan a sentence or two to explain the lessons and the Psalms, varying as they do from service to service.

How do you see the BCP working in tandem with the Bible?

Think about the BCP as the Bible orchestrated for worship – when you take the Prayer Book apart, just about every phrase echoes something in Scripture. And the BCP is the Bible orchestrated for worship much more fully than any modern alternative than I have seen as yet. Think of the difference between a full orchestra and a sextet – a few instruments trying to play the same grand music which that full orchestra plays. Since it is the same grand music, the sextet sounds a bit thin and forlorn.

Why are some Christians so suspicious of the BCP and how do we respond to that suspicion?

Some Christians have attended churches where the routine is for the minister to improvise his prayers and there is a prejudice going around in connection with this that what is called the formalism of the BCP is what makes Anglicans go light on the Gospel. Then, when these folk are confronted with the Prayer Book presentation of the Cross and the redeeming love of Christ, and our sin and our desperate need of grace, they don't recognize it as

powerful and searching language. It just impresses them as oldfashioned. Powerful language from the Sixteenth Century – think of Shakespeare – is something that you have to grow into. Kids at school find their first introduction to Shakespeare in the classroom burdensome and difficult just because they don't appreciate his style. So they can't identify with the characters in the play. It is a fact that about the middle of the Sixteenth Century, English suddenly took off, becoming colloquial, evocative, weighty and arresting. It took off first in the phrasing of Cranmer's Prayer Book and the First Book of Homilies. Explain this so that people understand it, and suspicion will give way to excitement. It happened to me and I have seen it happen to others.

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