

THE RECORD THE CHURCH SERVICE SOCIETY

EDITORIAL NOTE

This issue contains the Presidential Address given at the Annual General Meeting in May 1999 and the much appreciated main address at the recent Conference at Paisley Abbey.

On behalf of the Society I should like to record our thanks to the Reverend James C. Stewart for his address and for his service as President 1997-99 and to offer our congratulations to the Reverend Andrew McLellan on his nomination as Moderator of the General Assembly of 2000.

H.R.S.



PRESIDENTIAL PAPER – MAY 1999

Scripture: Salt Cellar or Pepper-pot for Liturgy?

The General Assembly of 1998 received from their Panel on Doctrine a report on the Interpretation of Scripture. Its final sentences read: “The Bible is a central resource for worship; it is through the Word of God read and proclaimed that faith is nourished and deepened. It is in their response in assent and discipleship that the Christian community is enabled to live the life of the Spirit, sustained by the mystery of Word and Sacrament as the pilgrim people of God.”¹ The body of the report, however, insofar as it deals with the interpretation of Scripture in worship concentrates almost entirely on the kind of interpretation which manifests itself in preaching. If that is not the direction in which I follow, it is certainly not because I wish to provide grounds for the kind

of allegation once made about this Society: that it was intent on opposing preaching and worship to the detriment of the former. Preaching, however, is not the only way in which Scripture is interpreted in the course of the Church Service. The number, length, and mode of presentation of the readings, the parts of the Bible from which they are drawn, and their sequence week by week and year by year raise many interesting questions which both reflect and bear upon understandings of the nature of Scripture. I am not certain that that fact has always been as high upon the agenda as it might have been in the considerable amount of attention which has been devoted to lectionary matters in recent years. With some reluctance I leave it to one side in order to look at what may be less central but is not, I think, devoid of importance. This paper is not designed to deal with Scripture as the principal ingredient of the liturgical feast, and so does not focus on (to use Dr Maxwell's favoured term) 'the Liturgy of the Word'.²...It is concerned, rather, as I hope the title hints if it does not openly declare, with the way in which Scripture is used (or possibly abused) in other parts of our public worship.

One of the paper's roots lies in a paragraph read many years ago in Lord Eustace Percy's sympathetic but by no means hagiographic biography of John Knox. He writes of "a difference of styles of worship which was to have a profound influence on English and Scottish minds. That difference was soon to be crystallised in the Form of Prayers of the English Church at Geneva, which became the basis of the Scottish Book of Common Order. Knox was not wholly responsible for its drafting, but his hand is evident in it. He attached hardly less importance than Cranmer to a common order of worship; Cranmer was hardly less convinced than he that this common order should be a faithful reproduction of the Bible. But their methods differed: Cranmer's was distillation, Knox's amplified quotation. Who can estimate the effect of each on his nation: on the one hand the music of the Book of Common Prayer, on the other the piled up eloquence of the Book of Common Order, with the whole tradition of extempore prayer which it originated?"³ Because it seems to me of general interest I have perhaps quoted rather more of Percy than was altogether necessary to indicate

the sense in which I am using the metaphors of salt and pepper. By them I do not mean exactly what he means by “distilled essence” and “amplified quotation” but my distinction runs along somewhat similar lines. Salt does its work by entering into solution. It loses its separate identity, yet its presence or absence makes a considerable difference to the final result. Pepper, on the other hand, does not dissolve. It disperses and forms a mixture (or so the somewhat distant memory of school chemistry seems to suggest to me).

Let me turn to a second root of this paper. It lies in an article by T.G.A.Baker, one time Dean of Worcester, in the journal *Theology* a few years ago on the current Alternative Service Book – that is, ‘alternative’ for those who stand in the tradition of Cranmer. He notes that the book “has been subjected to repeated criticism concerning its use of the Bible”, that “it has been said that the new services are not so much biblical as biblicist...that there are too many biblical snippets, torn from their context: that the imagery and language of the prayers and exhortations are too exclusively biblical”, that there is no real attempt to give biblical statements “resonance in terms of contemporary issues and concerns”, and that “the result of this wooden unimaginative use of the Scriptures ...is to encourage in congregations either a dangerous literalism, or an attitude of formal but uninstructed respect which is in fact quite superficial”. A little later he says, “It sometimes feels as if the Bible has a kind of stranglehold on liturgists from which they cannot free themselves. The very same people who agree that the Bible must be used with great sensitivity if its impact is to be real and authentic, are all too often the ones who in practice treat it as if it were a set of oracles dropped down from heaven”.⁴

Our tradition makes of all of us, without a great deal of advice or help, liturgists of a kind and it may be useful if we look at our own practice in the light of the strictures mentioned, which Dean Baker believes to be broadly correct, at least in relation to the way in which the services are presented if not in relation to the intention of their authors or revisers. Even if I were to resist some of the Dean’s premises, I have an uncomfortable feeling that my own practice would not survive scrutiny

unscathed. But since I do not intend to make this an occasion for public confession, nor yet for pillorying individuals who are not here to answer, let me turn my attention to the latest of these publications which the Church of Scotland, so the preface tells us, “has provided...to aid the corporate experience of worship” – namely, Common Order.⁵ How does it use Scripture as salt and pepper?

In order to keep the matter within bounds I confine my attention to what I hope might be thought of as the two most typical and representative services, namely the First Morning Service and the First Order for Holy Communion. Let us examine them in turn.

The former begins with what might be called a fairly vigorous shake of the pepper-pot:

“1.The Bible is brought into the church”,- a silent but telling testimony to a fact which the Panel on Doctrine states at the very outset of its report on interpretation: “Scripture has always been at the centre of Christian faith and will no doubt always be there.”⁶

“2.Call to Worship”. The first spoken words are undiluted Scripture – those quoted in the printed service are from a Psalm – and are followed by the traditional ‘call’ or bidding “Let us worship God.”

After a hymn we turn to “4.Scripture Sentence”. Here there is reference to the Sentences noted as ‘appropriate to the day’ which are listed along with collects in a calendar at the back of the book, and one sample ‘general Sentence’ is given.

If a question has been forming in the mind as to the effectiveness or helpfulness of gobbets of unidentified and unexplained Scripture as an invitation to worship in a day of widespread lack of acquaintance with the Bible, that question is surely sharpened by an examination of the ‘appropriate’ sentences at the back of the book. Some do, indeed, speak fairly clearly and directly, though even they might be helped by a little Knoxian ‘amplification’. But are you really going to tell even the fairly devout who will gather on the Monday of Holy Week: “ Those who

choose to do my will, will receive from me a memorial and a name in my own house and within my walls: for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” Of course I know, and you know, why it is there and how it relates to the Gospel of the day, but does it really serve as a useful introduction? Or are you going to ask, on Good Friday, “Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah with his garments stained red, one splendidly attired, striding along with mighty power?” Who indeed? And where’s Bozrah? That I (and maybe you) don’t know. And am I really supposed to stand in front of my congregation this coming Sunday⁷ and assure them, “I will be with you always, to the end of time” –when, of late, I have been indicating that my retirement cannot be too far away? An indication of who the speaker is would be of some help, but even that is not always enough. One is reminded of Ernest Marvin’s story from St James’ Lockleaze in Bristol in those days when evening services and youth fellowships were widespread and one might even make attendance at the latter conditional upon attendance at the former. With the very proper purpose of focusing attention on Christ and his claim, he stood up and declared, “Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Before the hymn could be announced a voice from the back pew was heard to say, “Well, he was a big-head then.”⁸ Such thoughts may not often be articulated but that they do occur as a result of ill-considered use of Scripture I do not doubt. Pepper misused sometimes makes folk sneeze. We do well to heed Paul’s advice to the Corinthians about the importance to those who come to our services of what they hear at the outset. On the one hand they may ‘think you are mad.’ On the other hand, encountering something that ‘searches the conscience and brings conviction’, they may declare ‘God is certainly among you.’⁹

But let us return to the service and to the first prayer. Here, I think, we have salt, well-used. It is a classic prayer, from the Nestorian Liturgy: “Worthy of praise from every mouth, of confession from every tongue, of worship from every creature, is your glorious name.” Does not that speak for all sorts and conditions? It is clear and simple, even if, for our age, one might wish for an alternative translation to ‘confession’. And though it could hardly be said to quote Scripture, it is salted with

Scripture, both in word and in form, having something of the parallelism of Hebrew poetry. I do not recognise the source of the amplification of that initial adoration or of the confession which follows but they share something of the same characteristics.

You may have gathered that I have some reservations about the peppering of services with sentences of Scripture ripped from their context. It may then seem a little perverse if I complain that no Scripture is offered in support of the absolution in the service we are considering. “Who but God can forgive sins?” remains a pertinent question, but to declare unequivocally the forgiveness of God seems to me to be a quite central function of the Ministry of the Word, but also one where it is important to cite one’s authority. The practice of Calvin suggests that he agreed.

When one turns to the prayers in the final part of the First Morning Service, one finds, I think, rather less indication of the influence of Scripture either as salt or pepper and the result is a little flat. That struck me particularly in relation to a phrase in the Intercessions which clearly does echo Scripture: “Until the earth is filled with knowledge of your love”.¹⁰ In Common Order it lacks (but does it not cry out for?) the pictorial vividness supplied by the Scriptural conclusion “as the waters cover the sea”.

Again, with regard to the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed, the Scriptural source of the phrase “entered into joy” is evident but does that source justify its use here in the past tense? Is not that entry reserved for the ‘last day’? Without pausing for an eschatological excursus in search of an answer, I pass to the conclusion of the service. Here we are told ‘The minister blesses the people from God’. That he should do so is one of his specific duties as enumerated by the ‘Form of Presbyterian Church Government’¹¹, emanating from the Westminster Assembly and approved by Act of the General Assembly February 10, 1645. Rather surprisingly, no specific form is mentioned there or in the ‘Directory for Publick Worship’. Knox’s Book of Common Order, however, specifies the Aaronic and the Apostolic blessings from Numbers 6 and II Corinthians 13 as alternatives. It might have been an appropriate

use of Scripture to have given them as the sample blessing here, without suggesting that people can only be blessed by direct quotation of Scripture. They are of course listed with many others, both Scriptural and non-Scriptural, in the appendix of Benedictions.

Moving to the First Order for Holy Communion, we find that the call to worship has had its Scriptural support filtered out, but Scripture sentences remain after the first hymn. I suppose that some might question the implied identification of the Psalmist's 'cup of salvation' with the sacramental cup in the third of the given sentences but I myself would see it as a quite defensible transference; and I hasten on to the specifically sacramental part of the service. It opens with an Invitation couched mainly, but not entirely, in words of Scripture. It conveys no hint of the 'fencing' which was once so formidable a part of Scottish sacramental practice and which did have some kind of Scriptural basis. Are we sure that we are justified in omitting any kind of cautionary utterance at this point in the present day? The traditional fencing never sought merely to debar. In the 16th century Book of Common Order it is complemented by a gracious reference to the sacrament as 'a singular medicine for all poor sick creatures'. The contemporary Book of Common Prayer achieved a similar balance, but was more directly Scriptural in its 'comfortable words'- from Matthew 11.28. The importation of these words into our service has removed them from their balanced context and seems to date from the heyday of liberalism in the earlier part of the twentieth century, perhaps through the 1928 Book of Common Order. Is this a case where a use of the words of the bible in isolation may distort its overall message?

The Invitation precedes the Great Entrance which is in turn followed by the 'unveiling' of the elements. That action is accompanied by a fine prayer which is heavily dependent on Hebrews 10.19ff. But why is it shorn of its reference to 'the veil'? It had it in earlier versions. It provided a direct link with the action of 'unveiling'. And, if it be alleged that it is obscure, it is surely not more so than other parts of the same prayer since the Biblical text provides an interpretation of the veil. The following, offertory, prayer is well-seasoned with Scripture – and admirably clear.

We pass immediately to the 'Narrative of the Institution'. Whatever strength the arguments may or may not have which led the compilers of the 1979 Book of Common Order to favour a position within the Great Prayer, it was clearly the mind of the General Assembly that on this and other matters the precedent of 1940 should prevail over 1979. Earlier, in a review of the latter book, the Methodist scholar Raymond George had regretted that book's departure from what he regarded as a defensible idiosyncrasy of the Scottish Church. So the words of institution stand on their own at the outset of the action. It is a clear reflection of the Reformed requirement that a Scriptural warrant should be available for all the essential features of worship. What is more readily questionable is the immediate repetition of part of these words in connection with the 'taking' of the bread and wine, an almost complete recapitulation at the Breaking of the Bread, and then a further repetition in the words of administration. That is surely an overdose of salt. The initial reading of the words of institution has provided authority for each of these actions and there are other Scriptural allusions and quotations which may be used with equal propriety at these points. Even stronger exception may be taken to the substitution of the subjective 'remembering him' for 'in remembrance' or 'as his memorial' in the words of administration. The memorial or remembrance is in the action of breaking and sharing, not in a separate and parallel mental act. That is not salt, nor pepper, but a spot of arsenic.

We return to the Great Prayer. For thanksgiving, after salutation and *sursum corda*, three alternatives are provided. They are very different and relate to Scripture in quite different ways. The first of these is the most traditionally 'catholic', but it incorporates the recovered late twentieth century awareness of God's creative work in a fine lyrical quotation from Job, chapter 38, but did it really have to replace the 'sons of God' with 'angels of God' as those who shouted for joy? It is scarcely going to satisfy those with gender sensitivities since Biblical angels are invariably male. The thanksgiving for redemption is likewise appropriately founded on a quotation from I Peter¹². *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* are, of course, largely but not slavishly Scriptural with, in

the case of the former, the entirely appropriate addition of heaven to earth as the arena of God's glory.

The Revised English Bible is, justifiably, Common Order's favoured translation but, as with the 'angels' above', it is (significantly?) departed from in the reference to I Corinthians 10.16 in the epiclesis. What was felt to be wrong with the admirably clear 'means of sharing in the body of Christ' that it should be replaced by 'communion of the body of Christ'?

The second thanksgiving 'is drawn from our own Reformed tradition, from the Genevan Service Book' and reproduced in the 1562 Book of Common Order. Of that it is a shortened reworking, but neither of them provides much in the way of support for Eustace Percy's assertion about 'extended quotation.' Here too is 'distilled essence' - albeit to a different degree and of a somewhat different spirit. There is, however, in the 1562 Book another prayer of apparently Scottish derivation to be 'added so ofte as the Lord's Table is ministred'. Although it is not, properly speaking, an epiclesis, it could, with a little adjustment, have supplied what is surely a real need in the prayer presently under discussion.¹³ This 1562 prayer is, interestingly, more directly Scriptural, drawing on the sixth chapter of John's Gospel - a chapter widely, though not universally, thought since early times to be eucharistic in its reference.

The third option speaks more clearly with the voice of the twentieth century. Its phraseology (galaxies, fragile earth, stewards of creation) seems to me to move beyond that of even recent translations. Yet it is not detached from Scripture. Its concerns have their roots there. Curiously (though no doubt quite defensively) a directly Scriptural phrase chosen to refer to the redemption in Christ ('you redeem us in your love and pity') is drawn from the Old Testament (Isaiah 63.9 - in the 'Bozrah' chapter!)

Although it is not directly a matter of Scripture, one may perhaps note that the final paragraph of this prayer, drawing on the Didache in seeking the gathering in of the Church from the ends of the earth does not use

the Didache's vivid reference to the bringing together of scattered seeds in one bread. Much scriptural and traditional imagery may have lost its power. This particular image has not and its omission highlights what seems to me to be a real weakness of much modern liturgical language. It does not do what the writers of Scripture did – go out into the world around to find vividly pictorial language. Too often it takes refuge in vaguely philosophical or psychological abstractions.

That, however, is not a criticism to be levelled at the common set of Proper Prefaces which is provided for both the first and third prayers. They (quite properly!) refer mainly to biblical events and expectations and make considerable use of Scriptural imagery and vocabulary.

An optional use of a final 'lump' of Scripture is suggested as a warrant for the sharing of the Peace after the receiving of the elements. If, looked at in its context, it warrants anything, it should surely be in connection with the penitential rite earlier in the service. Here, particularly in the light of our usual mode of sharing the sacramental elements, I find it simply intrusive.

To conclude: In our branch of the church, we are inseparably wedded to Scripture as containing that "Word of God" which is "the supreme rule of faith and life", including, we must presume, liturgical life. That declaration of inseparability contained in our constitutional articles is not there as a mark of our difference but as a mark of our belonging to the Catholic Church. The Word in Scripture is, for the whole church, declared to be a rule. That is, it is not a quarry from which lumps are to be extracted to construct a liturgy. To use it as a quarry spoils the landscape of faith. But what kind of rule is it? A prescriptive rule or a regulative rule? Do we set out to do what we are told in the law of God, or do we measure what we have done in Gospel freedom against the yardstick of Scripture? To do the former seems to me to be what Dean Baker describes as 'biblicist' and not to be truly and properly Biblical. Salt and pepper both have their place in the liturgical meal. Overuse as well as absence of either can spoil it. If I have been somewhat critical of Common Order I would not be taken as asserting that it has got the

matter grievously wrong. But it would, I think, be interesting to have some kind of commentary from the authors, editors or compilers indicating their intentions in relation to Scripture. It would be helpful to those who use the Book as a guide to be able to judge whether their use of it was in harmony with these intentions.

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NOTES

1. Panel on Doctrine, in *Reports to the General Assembly*, Church of Scotland 1998, p.11/43
2. See e.g. W.D.Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship*, O.U.P.1936, pp 12,13 and note
3. Eustace Percy, *John Knox*, Hodder & Stoughton 1937 p.200
4. T.G.A.Baker, 'This is the Word of the Lord', *Theology*, no 754, pp266ff
5. *Common Order*, Saint Andrew Press, 1993
6. Panel on Doctrine, *loc.cit.*, p.11/1
7. The Sunday following the delivery of the address was the Seventh Sunday of Easter
8. Ernest Marvin, *Odds Against*, SCM Press 1967 p.30
9. I Corinthians 14 23-24 (R.E.B/)
10. Isaiah 11.9
11. Under the head, 'Pastors'
12. I Peter 2.9
13. The editors of *The Reformed Book of Common Order* (National Church Association 1977) would, of course, not agree that an epiclesis is desirable. Making use of the same , first mentioned, 1562 prayer, they also make no attempt to supply an epiclesis, despite acknowledging (preface p.iv) that one is given in the Directory. Since Scripture is nowhere prescriptive in the matter, the question would seem to be whether it is more in accord with general Biblical principles relating to worship to include or omit , at such a central juncture in the Divine Service, an acknowledgement of dependence on the presence and power of the Spirit to achieve the dominically appointed end in the celebration of the sacrament.

