

Why Maintain Approved Liturgy?

The Rev. Canon Dr. Henry Janma

October 2016

We are in a retreat and my time is limited so I must speak very directly to my brothers in Christ here who have taken the oath of subscription and the oath of obedience to their bishop in the discipline of approved liturgies without regular alteration, and to ask their forgiveness for my directness.

When I am asked why I think maintaining the discipline of approved liturgies without regular alteration is good theology, worship, and teaching, I give a definition and then I give two reasons.

The purpose of a scripturally sourced and regulated form of liturgy is *doxological*. In other words, it is so that we may worship and glorify God. Therefore, the doctrine set out in the liturgy *must clearly communicate correct descriptions of divine realities*. As Robert Barron wrote in the first line of an article on St. Augustine: "...in the end it all comes down to a correct description of God."

And I am a minister called by God to the teaching and preaching of God's Word, to discipline, and to the administration of His sacraments. Therefore, I am not an ordinary person. I expect members of my congregation to make mistakes about the doctrine of God, of salvation, the Bible, and the Christian life, but they do *not* aspire to teach others about those doctrines, *they aspire to be taught better*. Once I enter the pulpit or take my place at the Lord's Table, if I have made mistakes in the drafting of a liturgy, **it is a whole lot more serious**. Rather than lead the people in worship that glorifies God, I have led them to worship something *less than* God or something *greater* than God.

Therefore, the **first** reason I give to maintain the discipline of approved liturgies is when I am tempted to revise or create a liturgy I am reminded by **what I do not know**. No person exists independently from our environments and the histories, the traditions to which we belong in the reading of any text. So the question is: *in which*

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environment, history or tradition will you trust? If I reject one set of correct descriptions of divine realities *I will unconsciously draw on other models* of which I seem unaware.

There is meant to be a proper balance between doctrine - proper descriptions of the realities of God with Christ at the center that glorifies the godhead, and is faithful to the received tradition of the church. That is why *The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* were bound with the services of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. It was so that people could see *the doctrinal basis of the liturgy* in the national church.

As Anglicans we have always held to a scripturally sourced and regulated form of tradition. We should admit however that to maintain this balance is a challenge for us and should give us pause.

- Some of us have come out of Roman Catholicism where tradition has a negative meaning for us. Where tradition is equal or *independent* to God's Word.
- Some of us have come out of an evangelical Biblicism, of "me and the Bible." Thus there is a *learned suspicion* of doctrinal categories and language that is thought to hinder evangelism and frustrate mission.
- Some of us have come out of liberal churches where there is contempt for the past - and so liberals make *a tyranny of the present*.

The result is we produce liturgies that are works of "studied ambiguity" in order to gloss over doctrinal issues. And we claim proudly that such ambiguity enhances "mystery" or promotes "mission"!

The **second** reason I give to maintain the discipline of approved liturgies is **when I consider my heart before God**. This is a question of our "prayer closet". I think we are all conscious of the presence of sin that remains within us. This is the gospel sorrow that all believers know.

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In our hearts we want God to reward us for the good deeds that we do. As the late medieval phrase says: *Facientibus quod in se est, deus non denegat gratia*: **To those who do what lies within them, God denies not grace.** Thus, to raise myself up, I needs must also lower God. *My heart is idolatrous.* The most destabilizing truth of the gospel, and the one that is most easily forgot, is how God saves us by *grace alone through faith alone*:

Nothing in my hand I bring,
simply to the cross I cling;
naked, come to thee for dress;
helpless, look to thee for grace.

God does something. It is *from God to us* and *we receive* what he has done. **We need to preach the gospel to ourselves every day.**

The smart, godly, bible-saturated men of our tradition who went into poverty, prison, exile, and even to the flames understood the reality of our fallen condition and God's incredibly gracious gift in Christ alone. They therefore not only understood that the purpose of the prayer-book liturgies and regularities were to fill us with an awe in our worship of God, but they also understood them to be necessary *evangelistic* and missional tools that reveals, as one oath says, "...a true profession of the gospel..."

Thus our historical formularies, put together, reveal the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. They saw the Book of Common Prayer as a tool, a strategy, to convert England to a biblical faith that had been totally obscured. It was *not* just to create a liturgical movement. So Cranmer, Ridley, and Latimer were martyred for their refusal to accept transubstantiation and its practices. Not for *ritualistic reasons*, but as *being contrary* to God's Word written, *a wrong view* of the person of Christ and

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His work of salvation that will lead people into God's glorious presence. It was a damnable error, and so they went to the flames in testimony against it.

And whatever one might think of the contingencies of the Reformation era, we must as brothers in Christ, as ministers called to proclaim His gospel see this unique epoch *theologically*. We must understand the nature of God's providences in history. These godly men *knew better than we* that the sinful heart inevitably defaults: "to those who do what lies within them, God denies not grace."

Modern liturgical trends try to do too much in order to accommodate to the differing views that exist in our churches. Therefore departure from maintaining the discipline of approved liturgies **obscures the simple, clear message of the cross**.

Consider one example of real gospel clarity from the 1662 Prayer of Consecration: *ALMIGHTY God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who made **there...***

Do you see that? **THERE, on the cross**. Not here, **THERE**.

*...(by his **one** oblation of himself **once** offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world...*

Consider also the structure of the communion liturgy. The language of sacrifice **does not appear at all until after all have received the elements**, as Hebrews 13 and Romans 12 teach us:

*And here **we offer and present** unto thee, O Lord, **ourselves**, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively **sacrifice unto thee...***

The 1662 Prayer Book tells us clearly that we do not trust in anything we do; we are sinners; we need God's grace to save us; we need His forgiveness; we need the cross; we need the Lord Jesus Christ.

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My dear brothers, does the church err? Yes. Does the church err greatly? Yes. But I implore you, by the mercies of God, to consider seriously how *the burden of proof is upon you* when you take your fingertips to keyboard to change the categories and correct descriptions of divine realities in the liturgy of the established church. If you are proposing a liturgical change for *regular worship*, not because of local pastoral need or for occasional use, then I implore you in the integrity of your ordination oath before God, you *must* present your evidence and your argument to the church officer charged to protect and defend apostolic doctrine – to your diocesan bishop or his appointed representatives. For as the Apostle James tells us, there are serious consequences for those who teach. Our focus is an eternal one.

If the correct descriptions of divine realities are sacrificed for “studied ambiguity”, if we try to do too much in our liturgies so that gospel itself is obscured, then consider the consequences to those yet unborn. When one generation *assumes* the gospel, the next generation *forgets* the gospel. And so that next generation will ask you, puzzled: “Granddad, why did we leave the Episcopal Church?”

The Bishop asked Diocesan Canon Theologian, Henry Jansma to present this paper during the clergy and spouse retreat, October 2016