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## Bad Language in the Church (I)

This article by P. D. James is taken from The Sunday Telegraph, February 14, 1988. Its message is still particularly relevant. Language as the conveyance of truth and beauty is essential and not accidental to Christian history and spirituality.

The references to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer may be compared to our version of 1928, and likewise those of the Alternative Service Book to the 1979 BCP.

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I am told by a mend who was previously the headmistress of a comprehensive school that the Book of Common Prayer is meaningless to young Christians today and is repellent to possible converts. How can they thank God for his manifold and great mercies when the word "manifold" to them is part of a motor-car? The old words, she points out, are archaic. Just as Cranmer used the language of his own day, so we should use ours. But I doubt whether Cranmer did, in fact, use the language of his own day. Liturgical English has never been the same as ordinary English and he had the genius to know this and to revise for all times, not merely his own. And it is certainly our misfortune that the Church has chosen to revise the liturgy and the Bible at a time when we have as little concern for the preseIVation and the beauty of our language as we have for much of our history and our culture. And if changes were necessary, need they have been so drastic? I was a guest at a country wedding last summer where I felt at times that the service could have been written by DHSS.

The old wedding service is one of incomparable loveliness and symbolism. Do we really need a debased version designed, one would almost imagine, to be acceptable to a largely secular and unbelieving society? And the Alternative Service Book is as complicated to use as it is cumbersome to hold. It is difficult to concentrate on worship when one is continually turning the pages in obedience to such instructions as those in the Holy Communion Service which are intimidatingly reminiscent of instructions on examination papers...

As a child I loved, and still do, the history and the romance of the Prayer Book. It is, of course, the book of an agricultural and a seafaring people which its prayers for fine weather and "such moderate rain and showers that we rmay receive the fiuits of the earth in due

season"; its gratitude that , after a plague of immoderate rain and waters, God "has relieved and comforted our souls by this seasonable and blessed change of weather"; its petitions for deliverance at sea from storm, tempest and the enemy; its emphasis on mutual respect and forbearance in local communities and for virtue, good order and respect for lawful authority in Church and State.

But the Book of Common Prayer is a power-house of marvelous prayers which meet timeless and universal needs. The beautiful evening Collect, "Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee O Lord, and by Thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night", goes back to the eighth century but is surely as relevant to an elderly woman alone in her inner-city flat as it was to our ancestors as the darkness closed about them. Why should we ever need to change it, however slightly, or to cease to pray it?

A far greater cause of grief and concern to many Christians is the substitution of the New English Bible for the familiar and beloved Authorised Version. The Bible is, of course, a collection of books originally written over thousands of years and constantly retranslated, revised, and reinterpreted; appointed following a conference at Hampton Court convened in 1604 by James I produced, after three-and-a-half years' work, a revised version of the Old and New Testaments which, for all the rich diversity of subject matter, reads as if it is the work of a single mind and that mind one of unparalleled genius.

*To be continued...*

**P. D. James**

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