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## THE PRAYER BOOK 7 EVANGELISM (PART 1)

### THE PRAYER BOOK &EVANGELISM

#### (PART I)

Is the historic Prayer Book an evangelistic liturgy? Can a church that uses one of the classical Prayer Books (England 1662, USA 1928, Canada 1962) fulfill the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations"? It is a mark of our time that many Anglican and Episcopalian Christians would answer these questions in the negative. The Prayer Book may be good for some things – but not evangelism. So runs the current wisdom.

Two intersecting major influences are responsible for this negative view of the Prayer Book – first, the influence of revivalistic evangelicalism and its 20th century charismatic mutation, and second, the influence of the "church growth" movement, with its use of modern marketing techniques to boost church membership. The first perceives the genuine movement of the Spirit, and genuine faith, in worship which is emotionally exciting and open to spontaneous self-expression. In Anglican or Episcopalian circles, this typically results in free prayer offered by individual worshippers, the singing of praise songs (with lyrics projected on a screen), and the raising of arms in expression of personal feeling. From this point of view, the objectivity of Prayer Book worship appears unspiritual and dead.

The second influence, the church growth movement, carefully designs services to attract and hold worshippers, who are treated as religious consumers. Such "seeker-sensitive" services are deliberately unchurchy and undemanding, providing upbeat contemporary music, and upbeat "messages" that aim at "relevance". The "churchiness" of the Prayer Book, its preoccupation with the administration of Word and Sacrament, the demands it makes of the worshippers, these are thought to be useless for church growth.

The historic record does not support this assessment of the Prayer Book as unsuited to evangelism. For the Prayer Book emerged from the sixteenth century rediscovery of the Evangel (the Gospel) and is one of its primary documents. At no other time in church history – certainly not the hey-day of twentieth century liturgical revision – was there a comparable clarity of conviction about the Gospel. Although not all Protestants considered the English Prayer Book the best expression of the gospel, Lutheran and Reformed liturgies resembled it

far more than they resembled the liturgies of contemporary charismatic revival or missional church growth. (My guess is that the evangelical reformers of the 16th century would have recognized the enthusiasm of the former as a version of Anabaptist sectarianism, and the latter's optimism as verging on Pelagianism.)

As an instrument of evangelism, moreover, the Prayer Book has been effective for more than four centuries, from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, not only in England but around the globe. For wherever English traders, explorers, navies, armies, settlers, government officials, and missionaries went, they went with the English Bible and the English Prayer Book. Missionaries expended enormous energy not only in translating the Bible into local languages, but also the Prayer Book. The present-day Anglican Communion was a result of that Prayer Book Christianity.

To suggest, therefore, that the Prayer Book is something less than adequate as an evangelistic liturgy, therefore, flies in the face of the historic evidence. Next week we will consider the Biblical basis for the Prayer Book as an evangelistic liturgy. GGD

(To be continued)

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