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## THE PRAYER BOOK & EVANGELISM (PART III)

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If one comes to the Prayer Book from the Bible's teaching about evangelism, rather than from the point of view of conventional wisdom about church growth, one discovers how profoundly evangelistic the Prayer Book is, how deeply it conforms with the New Testament teaching about the Gospel and the Church. It says something about the blinders of the present age, that this should be so rarely perceived. Yet the most distinctive features of the Prayer Book conform to the Bible's teaching about evangelism.

As we saw in last week's paper, the New Testament teaches that the evangelistic mission of the Church - as set forth in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) and related texts - is threefold. (1) It is centered in Christ, and in the remission of sins and reconciliation to God in his name (Luke 24:46-47, John 20:23 cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17-21). (2) It is proclaimed by means of the Church's apostolic ministry of word and sacrament. (3) It awakens and stirs up true repentance, justifying faith, and sanctifying obedience to Christ's commandments. That is essentially a capsule description of the historic Prayer Book liturgy. Indeed, some of the very features for which it is deplored - such as its strongly penitential devotion, and its emphatic clarity about the Christ's atoning death - are required by the Great Commission. It is the contemporary expectation that evangelistic liturgy should be upbeat and positive, not penitential, a celebration of community rather than a humble adoration of the crucified God, that looks out of step with the Great Commission. Likewise, one might note the confidence of the Prayer Book that the primary means of this evangelization - the means God has ordained and which we consequently may and should expect him to bless - is nothing else than the ministry of his Word and Sacrament. Whatever else may be said about praise songs, guitars, drums, video, drama, liturgical dance, clown ministry, personal testimonies, ejaculations of private prayer, the exchange of the peace, upbeat relevant messages, or what have you, it is not these, but the ministry of Word and Sacrament that Scripture regards as the primary and indispensable means of carrying out the Great Commission. Everything is either legitimate but ancillary (such as small groups for study, discussion, prayer, and encouragement in the faith) or trivializing and distracting. Scripture-believing Christians with a heart for evangelism need to look first to the Scripture's teaching on the means to be used, and with great

caution to the current conventional wisdom about spiritual revival and church growth.

This is not to vindicate do-nothing, dead-end fogeyism, or conservative complacency, against zeal for mission, or to dismiss out of hand what charismatic revival and the church growth movement seek to accomplish, and actually do sometimes accomplish. Nor is it to say that evangel-ism is merely a matter of "good liturgy", however much good liturgy may be the matrix of effective evangelism.

It is rather to point out the dangerous assumption which is too often un-critically embraced by sincere and zealous Christians: that the church can only grow evangelistically if it discards and distances itself from the church's own tradition. The blithe assumption that the pure core of the Gospel can be extracted from the Church and its tradition, and extracted easily and without impairment to its substance, is unfounded optimism. It is not like shucking a cob of corn. What we discard as irrelevant or alien to the Gospel is often precisely the tradition of faith and worship which over many centuries arose and developed in response to the Gospel, and which embodies and communicates the Gospel with great strength and clarity. As a result, what we discard often impairs the substance of the Gospel; and what we adopt in its place as means for church growth, often compromises it. Those who think that the Church can grow only by abandoning its own tradition and conforming to the latest marketing techniques should give heed to the apostolic charge: "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12:2). A church that grows by using of marketing techniques at the expense of the Church's ministry of Word and Sacraments runs the risk of conforming itself not to the Holy Spirit but to the Spirit of the world.

Few of my readers will be surprised by this critique. What they will ask for is some positive account of how a Prayer Book church fulfills the Great Commission in practice. That comes in the next and, for the present, last part of this essay.

GGD

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