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EVANGELISM AND THE PRAYER BOOK (CONCLUSION)

What's required for the Prayer Book to be as evangelistically effective in the 21st century as it was in the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th and even 20th centuries? No magic technique: just the implementation of the Great Commission: (1) an apostolic ministry ready and able to make disciples of all nations (2) by preaching the gospel and administering baptism for the remission of sins through repentance and justifying faith in Christ, and (3) by the teaching of Christ's commandments for the sanctification of the faithful in good works.

Apostolic Ministry: That means clergy who are themselves grounded in the Faith of the Bible and the Church as set forth in the Prayer Book: who believe and practice it, who understand and pray it, and are consequently able and ready to teach and train other Christians in the same Faith and Worship. Where the clergy are able to teach and transmit with clarity, coherence, conviction, and confidence what the Prayer Book sets before us to believe, pray, and do, a laity empowered by this teaching will themselves find the Prayer Book a powerful and effective way to believe, practice, understand, and pray the Christian Faith. By their word and example they will be able to commend the Gospel it presents, and its presentation of the Gospel, to their families and their circle of acquaintance, as a frame for living in the grace and favour of the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

Nothing magical about it: it is just the way Christian churches have always evangelized. Where the Prayer Book fails, it fails because of the clergy are hostile to the Prayer Book, do not understand its rationale, lack confidence in its ability to present the Gospel, are not able themselves to communicate this rationale, or simply do not believe the Gospel which the Prayer Book presents. Distressingly, such clergy are sometimes regarded as "conservatives".

Baptizing and Teaching. Central to the Prayer Book's "evangelistic strategy" (which is simply the Great Commission) is the baptism of the newborn (the normative practice), or (exceptionally, in missionary settings among the unchurched) of those come "to riper years and able to answer for themselves". Although the secularization of society and the demoralization of Christians have enlarged the missionary aspect of the Church's mission in formerly Christian countries, even where the baptism of children is not normal, it remains normative. After the first generation of adult converts, the children of the Church,

cannot be treated as pagans outside the covenant. To do so is to deny the power of the Gospel, which of its own nature produces Christian families and societies.

What is critical is to recognize that the Great Commission pairs baptism with catechesis. By thorough catechesis, as well as participation in the Church's common prayers, those who were baptized as infants grow up in the Gospel, and the more readily learn to repent, believe, and obey in accord with the promises of their Baptism. This enormous advantage conferred on the Christian church by infant baptism has historically been the primary way churches have grown. It made unnecessary the desperate expedients to which the churches are now being urged to resort. Yet Episcopalians have thrown away this advantage, by the weakness of their catechesis.

That the formation of mature Christians by such catechesis was an integral aspect of Anglicanism is now forgotten. Its disappearance has had far-reaching consequences. Far too many adult Episcopalians have only the vaguest ideas about the Christian Faith. This vagueness, transmitted to the children of the Church, has trained them up in indifference and ignorance, consumers rather than believers.

Until the 19th century, this was not the case. Anglicans and Episcopalians were first instructed in the Prayer Book Catechism, a kind of "shorter" catechism intended for little children. From there they went on to "middle" and "larger" catechisms of one kind or another: Nowell's Catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism, and Nelson's Feasts and Fasts, as well as sermons and homilies. Traditional catechesis engages the memory, and rightly so. But the catechetical method is more dynamic and interactive than one might think. What begins with a foundation laid in the sponge-like memories of the young, is developed in terms of understanding and will. Much of learning the truth depends critically on learning to ask the right questions.

The Church too often throws away the enormous advantages conferred by infant baptism, and the opportunity for spiritual formation through common prayer and catechesis. Rediscovering and refocusing on this primary pastoral and evangelistic discipline is a key to growing churches – not least because many families are looking for it. Despite the secularization of society and failures of the church, there are many folk out there with some sense of themselves as Christians, who are seeking to put down roots in the Faith. Show them where to do so, and they will take root, and grow.

GGD

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