

# The Prayer Book embodies Anglican theological principles

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In last month's article we learned something of the attitude of the first American bishop toward synods. Bishop Samuel Seabury held that synods could not and should not meddle with Christian doctrine. Now it is time to turn to the establishment of synods in our own land, specifically here in New Brunswick. Perhaps Bishop John Medley held significantly different views on the matter than Seabury did sixty years previously.

Medley held that "a servile copy of American conventions (would be) a very useless mode of proceeding." The reasons for this were multiple but included, "endearing ties with the Mother Church... and the desire to "remain in strict union with her" (a position, it must be noted, reiterated the year after Medley's death in the Solemn Declaration of 1893 - the founding document of the Canadian church) Medley also cited "the Prayer Book which has stood the test of three very trying centuries."

But once formed, what did Bishop Medley think synods should consider? He wrote, "We should not meet, thank God, to inquire into the foundations of our faith. We do not want to make a Church. We were born in a branch of the Catholic body, in which we hope to live and die." Echoing Seabury's words, Medley added, "we therefore find, that the subjects with which our Assemblies would have to deal, are necessarily limited. The record of our Faith has come down to us; we have only to hand it on undefiled and unimpaired." Positively, "Synodical assemblies would be found useful in regulating the temporal affairs of the Church, and in devising such prudent measures as may promote its enlargement and prosperity" as well as establishing a "code of Church law."

Bishop Medley was also clear on two related matters; the difference between synods and legislatures and the necessary limitations within which synods would have to work.

A synod is not a political body, consisting of citizens owning no special form of faith, drawn together by the exigencies of the time. If, in legislative assemblies, the laws of the past govern the present until they are repealed and the wise foundations laid by our ancestors are considered to be the pillars of our legislation, so in a synod, we neither meet to found a church nor settle the canon of Holy Scripture, nor to frame an ecclesiastical Constitution, nor to separate ourselves from the catholic believers before us, nor to begin to form a liturgy. We set out with these broad actions already laid.

To function properly, synod, "must, if its work is intended to last, retain a strong conservative element in its constitution." Change however, was neither impossible nor undesirable, but, essential changes should never be made without careful deliberation and the concurrence of all orders concerned in the change; and that when made, they should not be made in the interests of a party, nor for the purpose of crushing an adversary: nor should they place us in an antagonistic position to the decisions of the Catholic Church in all ages.

These are sobering words indeed for our own times. Party spirit is rampant, maneuvers in the public press are blatant and separation, not only from other catholic Christians, but from our own Anglican brothers and sisters, looms large.

If an change is to be Christian it obviously needs to be referenced to Holy Scripture in the sense of the theological truths contained in the whole. Here the creeds and the Prayer Book come into play as the standards against which change is to be gauged and evaluated. They are the instruments that help us as Anglicans relate our discussion to the broader Christian world and to our collective Christian heritage. This is not a new idea.

At the Lambeth Conference of 1878, Bishop H. Binney of Nova Scotia urged all Anglican churches "to receive and maintain, without alteration, the standards of faith and doctrine as now in use in the Church." Beyond the obvious reference to Scripture and the creeds Binney further recognized the danger posed by Prayer Book revision. However, he observed that revisions posed no threat to union "provided that no change or addition be made inconsistent with the spirit and principles of the Book of Common Prayer." Exhibiting no little theological insight he added, "I think the Prayer Book is our bond of union."

Binney understood that the Prayer Book was not just a collection of liturgical texts to be altered at will but a theological document. At Lambeth 1878, it had become apparent through the bishops' debates that the Anglican Communion was not going to achieve agreement on centralized authority. The notion of centralized authority in imitation of Rome in the form of a patriarchate of Canterbury or the idea of a voluntary court of appeals for the colonies were not going to be accepted. The Scriptures, three creeds and Prayer Book would have to bind them as a distinctive communion.

Binney highlighted the Prayer Book as an instrument of unity, an instrument all shared and one which contained the parameters of an approach to Scripture as well as further doctrinal exposition in the ordinal and the Thirty-nine Articles. Thus, while noting the danger that "the Prayer Book is open to revision by these different branches of the Church," Binney urged "it is important that some check should be suggested for the purpose of preventing provinces, very widely apart, from making independent changes to the Prayer Book." The issue as Binney understood it was not a matter of National churches exerting their independence by revising liturgical texts but a matter of "how are you to prevent that change from extending so far as to break the union?" In sum, the Prayer Book as a crucial mode of union, the Prayer Book as a unique and distinctly Anglican heritage and the Prayer Book as the embodiment of Anglican theological principles – this was the significant Canadian insight and contribution at Lambeth 1878.

We in Canada in 2007 still possess this heritage. Will we heed the words from our past, will we value it again, not as a relic of sweet sounding Elizabethan English, nor as an outdated collection of liturgical texts, but as the instrument of unity which Bishop Binney and Bishop Medley knew it to be? Will we return to Scripture, not as weapon, but as the Word of God? Will we learn anew the truths of the Faith as stated in the Creeds? Will we humble ourselves and seek His will in this our moment of confusion, conflict and deepest need?

#### **About the Author:**

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