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## For Truth, Unity, and Hope: Revaluing the *Book of Common Prayer*

J I Packer

A sermon preached under the auspices of the  
Prayer Book Society of Canada and now enlarged

Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity and encouragement among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom 15:4-6)

Our second lesson, from which these verses come, was set for us by the [Canadian] Church Lectionary. I would like to begin by saying that it is good to follow a Lectionary, because Lectionaries exist to ensure that everything of importance in the Bible is, in due course, read aloud in church. However, the Lectionary gives us the Bible in bite-sized pieces and this can create a problem of understanding when, as here, the set lesson picks up near the end of a document that was written to be read as a unity. The fifteenth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans is seven-eighths of the way through. If you wrote someone a long letter, you would not want them to start reading it seven-eighths of the way through, and it would be a little unfair to Paul, as well as to ourselves, to ignore what has been happening in the 14 chapters from which these words of Chapter 15 now follow on. In these chapters Paul has been doing something which, if we could have asked him, he would probably have told us was the most important thing he had ever done on paper: he has been giving us his full-dress exposition of the gospel that he preached. Paul is the great explainer among the New Testament writers, and here he is explaining in full detail the significance of the ministry of Jesus as the effective centrepiece of God's plan of salvation for sinners. Why, I wonder, do we Anglicans zero in so exclusively on the gospels and fight shy of the epistles? To seek to see Jesus in action, as the gospels enable us to do, is, of course, entirely right; but to bypass the teaching of the epistles is to sentence ourselves to not fully understanding what Jesus was up to when he was in action. Paul's great analysis of the plan of salvation that Jesus implemented is

strong stuff, calling for close attention and hard thought; it is, however, vitally important, and we are very much the poorer, spiritually speaking, if we miss out on it. So let us remind ourselves of it now.



Paul has arranged what he has to say in this Roman letter as an exploration of the theme that he labels 'the righteousness of God'. This is the theme that we Anglicans are taught by our Reformation heritage, and in particular by Article XI of our Thirty-Nine, to call 'justification by faith'. 'I am not ashamed of the gospel', Paul wrote (meaning, he was proud of it), 'for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes ... for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith' (that is, receiving and trusting the revelation of it is a matter of faith throughout) (Rom 1:16 f, NASV). That was how Paul introduced his topic. 'The righteousness of God' in Romans means the work of God bestowing a relationship of pardon and acceptance on persons who, so far from meriting the gift, deserve its opposite – condemnation and rejection for their sin. Paul's gospel, you see, was the marvellously good news that God in love saves sinners through our Lord Jesus Christ. Pagans in Rome in the first century needed to hear that news, and so do Anglicans today. After the introduction of his theme, Paul's argument moves thus: 1:18–3:20, the need of justification (all mankind is guilty before God); 3:21–5:21, the gift of justification (sinners receive righteousness through Christ by faith); 6:1–8:39; the life of justification (believers enjoy new life in Christ through the Holy Spirit); 9:–11:36, the recipients of justification (Jew and non-Jews who have faith); 12:1–15:3, the ethics of justification (loving and serving others, out of gratitude to God). The whole letter is a wonderful celebration of the grace of God who reconciled us to himself through his gift of Christ dying on the cross, who brings us peace, joy, and hope through his gift of justification, who has given us his Holy Spirit as a foretaste of glory to come, and who now asks us to live in a way that shows our appreciation of what he has done for us. The masthead of my neighbourhood journal, the Vancouver Courier, announces it as 'your good newspaper', but the gospel of God as set forth in Romans is better news than the Courier ever carries. Our text speaks of 'the encouragement of the Scriptures' and of 'the God who gives encouragement': the encouragement that is in view there is encouragement to trust Jesus Christ as our Saviour

according to this glorious gospel message and to live the new life of following him as Master, knowing that, as Paul said earlier (see 8:38 f), nothing in this whole wide world can ever separate us from his love.



Such, then, is the message that the verses of our text are rounding off. What I now ask you to notice in particular are the three specific divine purposes, all belonging to the one great plan of salvation, that Paul pinpoints here.

First, Paul speaks of God's purpose of teaching: 'Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us.' Paul has in view here the Scriptures of the Old Testament, but we may properly extend his words to cover the New Testament also, for the Old and New Testaments belong together. So we may take from Paul's words a reminder that our Bibles are given us 'for our learning', as the KJV puts it, to teach us about the grace of God and the hope of glory that he has given us, and to encourage us to live in the power of this happy knowledge: 'So that through... the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.' Why then, I ask, do we not soak ourselves in Scripture, as our Prayer Book Lectionary invites us to do? From the amount of Scripture set to be read each day of the year it is plain that our Reformers meant the Anglican Church to become the greatest Bible-reading church in Christendom, and Anglican Christians to become the most knowledgeable Bible students to be found anywhere. How many of us read right through our Bibles each year? How many of us have ever read right through our Bibles even once? Archbishop Cranmer's Lectionary would take us annually through the Old Testament once, the New Testament three times, and the Psalter 12 times. By our own standards we are very poor quality Anglicans when we make as little of our Bibles as most of us nowadays do. Why do we rob ourselves of the benefit of really knowing our Bible? Earlier in this letter Paul had spoken of the ignorance that makes real faith impossible, and of the preaching of the gospel as the way to dispel that ignorance. 'How, then', he had asked, can people 'call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?' (10:14). We need to understand that in the words of Scripture God himself preaches to us, to give us knowledge of Christ and his grace. Holy Scripture is God preaching.

Whenever we scoop a little time out of our busy day to open and read our Bibles, God himself teaches and instructs and warns and exhorts us: all that we read comes from him and in one way or another bears on our lives: realize then, God's purpose of teaching, and resolve to match it with a personal purpose of learning from his written word. Thus we shall learn to know Jesus Christ as our own Saviour, to bask in our heavenly Father's love, and to appreciate our hope of glory, and thus God's purpose of encouraging us through the Scriptures will be fulfilled.

Second, Paul speaks of God's purpose of uniting: 'May God ... give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus.' The issue of unity was one that Paul needed to raise. Rome was a cosmopolitan city, and it is clear that the church there was a multinational community in which Jews and many sorts of non-Jews worshipped side by side. But multinational communities are not easily maintained, and there are hints in Romans that these particular Jewish and Gentile Christians were not getting on too well with each other; nor were those members of the congregation who thought of themselves as strong getting on too well with those whom they regarded as weak. Paul knew, however, that it is central to God's plan to form here on earth through Christ's ministry what we may properly call a new humanity, a sort of community that the world sees nowhere else, where people so different from each other as to appear quite irreconcilable live in love and peace as brothers and sisters. Part of the divinely planned demonstration of the power of the gospel is to be the unity of the family of God. Paul knows this, and again and again speaks urgently and emphatically about it, as he does here.

He has, as we would say, a conscience about it. Do we have a conscience about unity, I wonder? The challenge to practice unity was demanding in Paul's day when anti-semitism was strong and outside the church Jew and Gentile lived in a state of mutual contempt. The challenge is equally demanding today, when in virtually every congregation different people have different preferences, policies, and visions of what ought to happen. Current disagreements and painful memories create tensions that simply cannot be overcome unless God, through the Holy Spirit, bestows a spirit of unity – a spirit that desires unity for God's glory, and that is willing to forgive and forget hurts and wounds to one's pride, in order that unity may be achieved. One example: Corrie Ten Boom, the Dutch lady who suffered so grievously in a German prison camp during the Second World War, and who saw her sister

die there under the ill treatment, was later confronted by one of the guards who had treated them so brutally. He told her he had become a Christian, and asked for her forgiveness. To forgive him seemed to her in the first moment impossibly hard, but with Christ's help she did it, and thus a God-given spirit of unity bound together two people whose reconciliation, humanly speaking, seemed inconceivable. This illustrates how God's purpose of uniting the alienated is meant to be fulfilled among those who follow Christ. If, as I suppose, we in our congregations do not experience anything like the same level of potential discord as that between Corrie Ten Boom and the ex-camp guard, is it not scandalous that we should cherish disaffection on account of our differences of opinion?

The divine purpose is 'that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Why are we not more concerned about love and togetherness in our congregational life? Why do people not find us more humble, and more forgiving.

Third, Paul speaks of God's purpose of encouraging and of giving hope, which is the source and focus of encouragement: '... that [through]... the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope'. 'May the God who gives ... encouragement give you ... encouragement ...' Verse 13 is similar in thrust: 'May the God of Hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.' We have glanced at this emphasis in Paul already, but there is more to be said. All through the letter, Paul has been writing in the role of a long-range pastor to the Roman Christians, and it is in that role that he now expresses his desire that God will thrill their hearts with the gospel message, causing them to live bravely and triumphantly, glowing with the joy of their hope of glory. He knows, as we also know, that human beings need hope; that lack of hope breeds pessimism, always expecting the worst, and that pessimism breeds bitterness, making us sadder and sourer all the time. Human beings are often described as rational animals, but it would be a deeper truth to call us hoping animals. It is our nature to live in our future, and one element in happiness is to have something wonderful to look forward to. To be growing old without a hope of glory brings gloom and misery, a tragic wasting of the spirit. One sees it often in elderly unbelievers, and it breaks the heart. But Paul knows that the God of the gospel is a God of hope, who wants Christians to overflow with hope, and to be filled with joy and peace and courage through

their knowledge of their hope, so that they will live in loyalty to Jesus, and in faithfulness to principle, and cheerful disregard of what people who dislike their Christian commitment may say about them or do to them for being on the Lord's side. God intends all Christians to glow with hope and experience encouragement in this way; it is part of his plan for us. May it become more and more of a reality in your life and mine.



We have seen that teaching, uniting, and encouraging Christian people are three specific purposes of God, whereby his plan of salvation is carried forward in our lives. I want us now to see, however sketchily, that the 1959 Canadian Prayer Book, which is ultimately a revised edition of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, is a brilliantly effective tool for furthering these purposes. Do we sufficiently appreciate the Prayer Book that our Society exists to uphold? I wonder! I am sure it will do us good to remind ourselves how fruitfully the Prayer Book fulfils this threefold divine agenda. The first of God's goals that Paul mentions is teaching, the building up of the mind. The Prayer Book teaches, and its main services mainly teach the gospel of Christ. The structure of those services expresses the gospel, just as their words and phrases do, and the power of Anglican liturgy to instil the gospel into human hearts has been central to Anglican experience for nearly 450 years. This is the legacy to us of that still unappreciated genius, Thomas Cranmer, the mid-sixteenth-century reforming Archbishop of Canterbury. Cranmer saw that the way to make liturgy express the gospel is by the use of a sequence of three themes. Theme one is the personal acknowledgment of sin; theme two is the applicatory announcement of God's mercy to sinners; theme three is the response of faith to the grace that is being offered. The sequence is evangelical and edifying – edifying, indeed, just because it is evangelical. Gospel truth is what builds us up! See this sin-grace-faith sequence in Cranmer's Bible services, Morning and Evening Prayer. First we are summoned to confess our sins, and we do so. Next we hear the good news that God pardons and absolves all who truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel. Then the rest of the service is the third step in the sequence, the expressing of responsive faith. We say the Lord's Prayer, with special emphasis on 'forgive us our trespasses'. We sing canticles of praise for salvation, starting in the morning with 'O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us heartily rejoice in the

strength of our salvation’, and in the evening with ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour’. We hear the word of God with the purpose of learning more about his mercy and the way in which we saved sinners are to serve him in this world. We pray for others in the confidence that the God who has blessed us will bless them too. All this is faith’s response to the knowledge of God’s saving grace in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. The sequence is profoundly simple, profoundly biblical, profoundly moving, and profoundly enriching to the soul.

The Holy Communion service is basically structured by the use of the same sequence. The Ante-Communion (collect for purity and law of God, pointing to sin; prayer for mercy after the law and New Testament readings, pointing to grace; confessing the Creed, hearing the sermon, and praying for the world as expression of responsive faith) takes us through the sequence in an introductory way, and this is followed by a second journey through it in poignant applicatory terms:

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins,  
and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and  
intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of  
God and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near  
with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort.

However the first step towards the Table must be confession of ‘our manifold sins and wickedness which we, from time to time, most grievously have committed’. Then the second step is the Absolution, backed by the scriptural assurances of mercy for sinners through Christ which we call the comfortable words. And the third step is thanksgiving for salvation, faith responding to grace, which is what the *Sursum Corda* (‘Lift up your hearts’) is all about. Then, after all this, we come to the sacrament that confirms the word of grace by setting before us in visible symbol Christ’s ‘full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world’. When we receive the elements, the words of administration express application: we are told to consume them in remembrance of Calvary, be thankful, and feed on Christ in our hearts. It is clear that our receiving and consuming is meant to express responsive faith: Lord Jesus (our hearts should be saying), as I take this bread and wine so I receive you afresh to be the bread of my life, the life of my soul, my Saviour and my God. This is magnificent, surely. The 1985



Canadian Book of Alternative Services is less forthright in words, and less clear in structure, about these things; if we value the gospel-oriented liturgy that Cranmer bequeathed to us (the 1959 Canadian Book is almost all Cranmer, though a few changes were made), we shall see the BAS as retrograde to what is central, a step backwards rather than forwards, a cheap modern runabout offered in exchange for a classical liturgical Rolls-Royce, and we shall certainly think it a pity.

The second of God's goals that Paul mentioned was uniting, the extending and deepening of fellowship. Part of our Anglican heritage is a centuries-old experience of the unitive power of all joining together in the same worship and learning together to enter into it and make it our own. This too is part of Cranmer's legacy: his strategy was to abolish local liturgies, of which England had a number, and to prescribe just one, in order to bring about national unity in gospel faith and gospel worship. I want to celebrate the wisdom of this strategy which, until quite recently, was a mark of Anglicanism throughout the world. And, quite specifically, I wish to put it to you that it is retrograde when modern revised forms include at key points, most notably the Prayer of Consecration in the Holy Communion service, half a dozen alternative forms between which the celebrant may take his choice. With such variety we cannot achieve the degree of unity and togetherness among church people that comes when we are all learning to worship God with a single liturgical form. To fulfil this unitive role, the liturgical form used has to be a good one! It has to express the biblical and evangelical truth to which the Church is corporately committed, and it must do this in a full and faithful way; also, it must express the concerns about spiritual life and honouring God that Church members do or should have. I believe that on all that is central, crucial and foundational the 1959 Canadian Prayer Book actually does this, and does it superbly. To be sure, it uses a style of speech that is based on the English Bible as this emerged in the 90 years between Tyndale and the King James Version, and it is semi-technical in its use of key biblical concepts. Therefore it is true, and indeed important to say that using the Prayer Book properly involves learning a language. But should this daunt us? We do not complain of having to learn the language of computers, daisy wheels, bytes and floppies; we simply learn it, in order to be able to use computers. Why then should anyone balk at learning the language one needs in order to worship God? There are technical terms in the Bible, which those who want to know about God labour to learn. For half a century people have

been assuring us that up-to-date worship forms can be devised that will express everything Cranmer expressed while using only everyday words – the language of secular life, that is – so that the meaning of the liturgy becomes clear to the most casual worshippers, without their having to learn anything. But the idea is unrealistic; it is a mere will-o'-the-wisp; the thing cannot be done. Try to do it, as the BAS seems to try, and what happens is that the truth-content of worship gets watered down, so that liturgical expression becomes vague, and less worthy worship is thus made inevitable. It is no wonder many Anglicans are moved to say of the Canadian venture into this area, 'what a pity', and even, 'what a disgrace'. It is no wonder, either, that the BAS divides rather than unites. Ever since the sixteenth century, worshippers have been finding that the forms of words in our Prayer Book are wonderfully enriching and enlarging to the soul. They mesh in beautifully with the teaching of Holy Scripture, which they echo, and the experience of literally millions of Anglicans has been that the more light one gains from the Bible the more wisdom one finds in the Prayer Book. If we taught the Prayer Book to our congregations, as our Anglican forebears used to do (this, I believe, is where today's Anglicans have missed out), and if we showed the links between the Prayer Book and the Bible at each point, and if we explained that Christian worship is a learned activity and helped people to learn it, I believe we should find the Prayer Book exerting its unitive power once more in a way that would amaze us. May God give us who teach, the good sense to tackle this task as a step towards recovering the internal unity that God intends for our Anglican Church.

The last of God's goals that Paul mentions is 'encouraging'. Encouraging is a matter of imparting hope and strength, by making Christians aware of their resources in God. Thus encouraged, Christians will live courageously and consistently for God, however much the culture is against them and however often they find themselves swimming against the stream. One thing I love about our Prayer Book is that it makes so much of the greatness of God's gracious power to strengthen us in our spiritual weakness; this is encouragement that I need. Threats to our faith, our moral and spiritual integrity, and our zeal for God's cause, are constantly with us. Spiritually speaking, in these days of dramatic spiritual decline, we are beset by what the Prayer Book calls 'many and great dangers', however materially secure we may seem to be. I am thankful that the Prayer Book offers me so many prayers pointing to the great grace and power of my great God and Saviour

to strengthen his people when they are under great pressure. Here, for instance, is the collect for Trinity IX:

Grant to us, Lord, we beseech thee, the spirit to think and do always such things as be rightful; that we, who can not do anything that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will.

Here is Trinity XIX:

O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee: Mercifully grant, that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.

And here is Advent IV:

Raise up, we beseech thee, O Lord, thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us.

You see the emphasis: we are weak and impotent; God is great and strong; urgently, therefore, we cry for his help. Surely this is realistic; surely this is the biblical way to pray. The alternative collects that we are offered today are often more eloquent, in their smooth, bland way, but are invariably less urgent. The sense that we are praying out of a realization of our weakness, sinfulness, and spiritual danger, and out of experiences of being harrassed, distracted, and discouraged, is much diminished. The BAS, one might say, is for nice people whereas the Prayer Book is for real people. I do not find that the BAS helps me to pray as much as the Prayer Book does, nor does it encourage me in the same way.

#### IV

Do we sufficiently appreciate our Prayer Book? Electric light is hardly appreciated till there is a power outage, and then one has to make do with candles, and by the time the light comes on again one has realized what a boon electric light really is. To be deprived of our Prayer Book would, I think,

constitute a spiritual power outage, and I grieve for those churches where for practical purposes its use has already lapsed. We need to revalue our Prayer Book upward. This, I believe, would be the best and most direct route to the renewal in our Church of the blessing for which Paul prayed – that the God who gives endurance and encouragement may give us a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the Father, and that the God of hope may fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in him, so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. God grant it!

Amen.

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