



## Necessary or Expedient?

A teaching series on prayer book revision

# Leonel Mitchell, Reshaped

By Matthew S.C. Olver

Leonel L. Mitchell's *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on The Book of Common Prayer* is commonly understood as the key to understanding the 1979 prayer book. Leonel Mitchell was one of the most influential Anglican liturgists of his time and played a central role in the prayer book's revision. He published this commentary just as the new prayer book was beginning to reshape the Episcopal Church's worship, and it has been read by generations of seminarians.

More than 30 years after its publication, the classic has been updated (Church Publishing, 2016) by Ruth A. Meyers, dean of academic affairs and Hodges-Haynes Professor of Liturgics at Church Divinity School of the Pacific. As Mitchell's former student and longtime chair of the Standing Committee on Liturgy and Music, Meyers is a figure whose commanding place in the world of Episcopal liturgy compares to that of her mentor.

The 1979 prayer book emerged from the 20th-century Liturgical Movement. Liturgical reformers sought to renew the Church's worship for the challenges of the modern age through ritual simplification and a return to early Christian texts and patterns. The movement united Western Christians across a wide denominational spectrum, and was infused with energy and theological heft when the Second Vatican Council endorsed its agenda.

The individuals tasked with revising the liturgical rites brought a variety of agendas into their work. The relationship between their original purposes and the reception of their liturgies has been a focus of considerable scholarly debate. *Praying Shapes Believing* contributes helpfully to this discussion, interpreting the 1979 prayer book through the particular spin on the maxim *lex orandi, lex credendi*.

For both Mitchell and Meyers, this derives from the work of Aidan Kavanagh, OSB, who described the liturgy as "primary theology," referring to the language we use to talk with God. "Secondary theology" is the language we use to talk about God: "the body of statements or propositions based upon or derived from our reflection upon our inter-

change with God" (p. xix). Kavanagh interprets the relationship between the two such that the majority of the influence is from primary theology (*lex orandi*) to secondary theology (*lex credendi*).

The maxim, for both, seems particularly applicable to Anglican churches, which have relied on liturgical texts as doctrinal formularies to an unusual degree, in the absence of a formal magisterium as in the Roman Catholic Church or confessional tradition like much of the continental reformations. For at least some of those who shaped the 1979 prayer book, such as Urban Holmes, there was a desire to force a significant development in the Episcopal Church's theology *as a whole*, to reflect an awareness "of the bankruptcy of so-called 'classical theology'" ("Education for Liturgy" [1981], p. 131).

The relationship between *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* is actually much more complicated. There is a complex interplay between liturgical rites, the praying of those liturgical rites, the beliefs of those who pray them, and the formal teaching of the church. In an earlier essay in this series, Andrew McGowan reasonably suggested that despite 37 years of continual use, the sacramental sensibilities of contemporary Episcopalians have not really been altered by the more Catholic patterns and beliefs of the 1979 prayer book. Similarly, Louis Weil and Frank Griswold, who both contributed to the formation of the 1979 prayer book, have recently expressed a similar sentiment: we have not yet lived into the fullness of the "new" prayer book. In other words, the revision of the *lex orandi* has yet to result in a cohesive *lex credendi*.

Mitchell outlines a series of changes in the *lex orandi* of Episcopalians rooted in the Liturgical Movement's broader agenda. The eucharistic rites show a desire to return to the sources (*ressourcement*). This orientation included a distrust of medieval developments and a preference for the "golden age" of patristic praying. Hence the basis of all four Rite II eucharistic prayers is primarily not earlier Anglican prayer books but patristic rites.

Vatican II's advocacy of the "fully conscious and active participation" of the lay faithful is expressed through the



1979 prayer book's clear directions about lay participation in the liturgy, as well as the broader concern to distinguish the liturgical roles proper to the episcopal, presbyteral, and diaconal orders. Another characteristic of the movement is the emphasis on a balanced calendar that includes the centrality of Sundays and the normativity of a corporate celebration of the Eucharist on that day. Like many of the leaders in the Liturgical Movement, Mitchell expresses frequent concern that Western liturgy had become too cruciform in focus, so that the cross and the sacrifice of Christ overshadowed the resurrection, ascension, Pentecost, and the second coming.

There is a great deal to commend in Ruth Meyers's revision of Mitchell's classic text. The whole look of the book has changed, with new typesetting, fonts, and headers. The footnotes contain updated scholarly sources, especially where the consensus has changed. She notes, for example, that *Apostolic Tradition*, often attributed to Hippolytus, is no longer seen as Roman or Hippolytan, let alone the "golden anaphora" from which all others have fallen.

In light of the full communion shared between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, occasional references are made to parallel liturgical practices in that sister church. In additional gestures of ecumenism, Meyers adds citations from the World Council of Church's *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (pp. 147-48), and refers to the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation (p. 150).

Other changes reflect Meyers's concerns. In the discussion of the Baptismal Covenant, she deletes this sentence: "The Church has called those who recited a different *symbolum* heretics, for quite literally they had a different baptism, because they baptized into a different faith" (p. 100). The holy catholic Church of the Apostles' Creed is no longer "the principal sphere of the Spirit's activity" but simply a principal sphere (p. 117).

In a section on participation in the Eucharist by the newly baptized, she deletes this sentence: "There are no theological reasons why baptized Christians who are not excommunicate (BCP: 409) should be forbidden to receive communion, and there are many good theological reasons why they should be encouraged to do so" (p. 117).

An interesting shift in emphasis can also be discerned at the conclusion of both books. Mitchell concluded with a brief section on "The Theology of the Liturgy." There he made a plainspoken *apologia* for the Episcopal Church's Catholic identity, "a province of the Anglican Communion within the Catholic Church" (p. 301). "The Church is a living tradition," he wrote, "and we come to its liturgy from within that tradition. The Church is the interpreter of its liturgy, as it is of its Scripture, and we cannot interpret the liturgy correctly except from this tradition. That is why I have used the liturgy of the Episcopal Church, within which I am a priest of the Catholic Church, as the source for my theology. I believe that the *Book of Common Prayer* 1979 expresses that theology in a way that men and women today can believe, live, and teach to their children" (pp. 301-02).

All this disappears in the new edition. In its place is a

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postscript focused on the mission of the Church and the Baptismal Covenant. This may, in fact, point to some of the shifts that have marked the Episcopal Church in the last 40 years: from the emphasis on its Catholic identity that certainly came to the fore in 1979 to the importance of what is unique about the Episcopal Church (both among Christians more widely and the Anglican Communion specifically). One of the factors that is considered most unique and central to the Episcopal Church's identity is the centrality of the Baptismal Covenant, which has become both the overriding hermeneutical lens and the engine behind the main developments that have marked the church's life during this period.

### Possible Future Revisions

The most prominent indicator of the places where Meyers would like to see changes in the future is the way that *Enriching our Worship* is integrated into the revised text of *Praying Shapes Believing*. In her introduction to the Revised Edition, Meyers highlights the Enriching Our Worship series' five supplemental texts. Along with these books, she mentions *The Book of Occasional Services* (1979; last revised in 2003) and *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (last revised in 2006).

A key distinction between these resources is left unstated. The materials in *Occasional Services* and *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* do not require the permission or authorization of a diocesan bishop or standing committee. *Enriching Our Worship*, on the other hand, is not authorized *carte blanche* for the whole Episcopal Church. Rather, its use is subject to the permission and direction of the bishop. *Enriching Our Worship* is meant to supplement Rite II. This sort of resource was never envisioned by the Constitution (a fact which General Convention 2015 attempted to address but ultimately did not with proposed Resolution A066).

Here's the issue: readers will be confused without a distinction between the Book of Common Prayer, which constitutes an expression of this church's authoritative and binding *magisterium* to which the bishops are subject, and other

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materials, which do not carry such weight and are subject to the bishops. Such a distinction is nowhere to be found in discussion of the various eucharistic prayers, which moves between those in the prayer book and *Enriching Our Worship* with such fluidity that the reader is left to conclude the fullness of eucharistic praying is only achieved through the inclusion of the supplemental materials.

In her other books, Meyers cites other issues that might be addressed in a future prayer-book revision. One of those is the Nicene Creed. Meyers replaces a sentence of Mitchell's that acclaims the creed as sign of unity and renewal of the Baptismal Covenant with a clause noting that it "provides material for both an historical and a systematic theology."

"It is not an essential part of the liturgy," she adds. "It was introduced into Eastern liturgies in the early sixth century and was only added to the liturgy at Rome in the eleventh century. The core beliefs of the church are expressed in the eucharistic prayers, which carries much of the theological weight of the liturgy on weekdays when the creed is not proclaimed" (pp. 158-59). The complicating issue, of course, is that in *Enriching Our Worship*, any gendered proper names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and their subsisting relations disappear. This disappearance is only exacerbated if the Creed is not used, as Meyers seems to favor and as *Enriching our Worship* appears to allow.

When Meyers discusses the frequency of the general confessions, she adds the clarification that "there is no ancient precedent for a general confession of sin at any point in the eucharistic liturgy" (p. 152). This is a bit misleading, since there is precedence for preparatory prayers of penitence by clergy of both Eastern and Western churches, the use of the Confiteor from at least the 11th century in the West, and most importantly the requirement that a Christian confess all serious sins sacramentally before receiving Communion. The rejection of the necessity of auricular confession at the reformations leads to the appearance of general confessions. Without this background, one is left with the impression that confessions are simply an incursion into the eucharistic liturgy. This perspective is furthered because Meyers deletes a sentence by Mitchell that notes, "The confession of sin is an integral part of our common prayers and an important preparation for worship."

### Conclusion

What gives me most pause in this update are the ways in which I find the book misleading. What I have described about *Enriching Our Worship* is perhaps the most serious concern, but it reflects the approach in some of Professor Meyers's other publications, especially on issues of gendered language for God. Both in this volume and elsewhere, an ancient source is often provided as the authority for the particular change discussed. For example, the alternative to "Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit" in Morning and Evening Prayer, the reader is told, is "similar to the

opening doxology of Byzantine Vespers, 'Glory to the holy, consubstantial, life-giving and undivided Trinity'" (p. 43).

What is substantially different from the Orthodox usage, however, is that this language is not used in that different context and rite for the purpose of avoiding the proper Names for the Three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But that is precisely their purpose in *Enriching Our Worship 1*: to use only non-gendered language for God. Important patristic figures or other saints are named as the source for other particular changes, and this leads the reader to infer that these figures would support the sorts of changes envisioned by *Enriching Our Worship*. It is one thing for a saint to call Jesus *mother* in a particular context. But it is quite another to suggest that it is proper to revise the liturgical language of the eucharistic rite by replacing *Father* with *Mother*, or dispense with gendered language altogether, and to imply that those writers advocate such changes. Thus, I find it difficult to recommend the text for seminary classrooms.

The Christian faith is, among other things, a language and even has something of its own syntax. As Stanley Hauerwas puts it: "To speak Christian is an exacting discipline. It has taken the church centuries to develop habits of speech that help us say no more than needs to be said. ... For learning to speak Christian means that what we say requires constant practice because the dominant speech habits that also shape our speech tempt us to not know what we mean when we say 'Jesus.'"

Becoming part of the Jesus Movement, a phrase that Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has brought into the regular speech of Episcopalians, involves not just learning to act in certain ways, but also learning to speak in certain ways and with a particular language, whether in conversation or in prayer. In Bishop Frank Griswold's preface to the first volume of *Enriching Our Worship*, he explains that during the process of its formation, this question was continually asked: "Is this text consistent with the Trinitarian and Christological formulations which we, as Anglicans, regard as normative and the ground of our common prayer?" I struggle to answer this question in the affirmative for much of *Enriching Our Worship*'s contributions to the Office and the Eucharist. And this is what gives me pause about the sort of material that would emerge from a wholesale revision. Let us give ourselves another generation or two, not just to pray the 1979 BCP, but to teach it well and mine its depths with new teaching texts like Derek Olsen's *Inwardly Digest: A Prayer Book Guide to the Spiritual Life* (Forward Movement, 2016). There is additional rich fare yet to be savored. Taste and see.

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