

# I get mail . . .

I received the following today, which succinctly summarizes questions I have been asked numerous times in recent years:

*Dear Sir,*

*Just curious about how you can be a part of ACNA which endorses and embraces innovations to doctrine and discipline that seem to make the Assumption and IC rather more forgivable- i.e. ordination of women, theology of the 1979 BCP, etc. Thanks for your website.*

*Sincerely, Fr. \_\_\_\_\_*

My response follows:

Fr. \_\_\_\_\_,

Your question is too short to answer without knowing what specific objections you have in mind, and on what basis you object.

I am enough of an Anglican to follow Richard Hooker in his distinction between matters of doctrine and morals (which are unchangeable) and matters of church practice and polity (which, under certain circumstances can be).

So the 1979 BCP is a matter of church practice and polity, a fallible human document, as was the 1549 BCP, the 1552 BCP, the 1559 BCP, the 1662 BCP, the American 1928 BCP, the Roman Catholic Tridentine rite and the Novus Ordo. Cranmer's Prayer Book captured well the Reformed Catholic theology of the English Reformation, but, as a document of its time, it shared many of the problematic assumptions of late Medieval spirituality and theology that were common then. The 1979 BCP, whatever its weaknesses, was largely a product of the liturgical renewal movement of the mid-twentieth century, which, as a movement of its time, also shared in many of the

problematic assumptions of the mid-twentieth century. Nonetheless, the liturgical renewal movement also got a lot of things right, and the 1979 BCP, while not infallible, was, in some definite ways, an improvement on Cranmer.

The ACNA does not, however, regard the 1979 BCP as without problems. I am a consultant to the Liturgical Taskforce of the ACNA, and the Committee is now working on what will be a long term project of producing a new Prayer Book. The Committee has already produced a new Ordinal, which corrects what we regard as some of the defects of the 1979 Ordinal, and it is now being used exclusively for ordinations in the ACNA. The Committee's current task is to produce a new baptismal rite, which will, in time, replace the 1979 rite. However, this is going to be a lengthy and piecemeal process. Until the new Prayer Book is produced, congregations are free to use any of the traditional Prayer Books (including the 1979), recognizing that none of them are infallible, but something is better than nothing, and it is impossible to produce a new Prayer Book out of thin air. Neither will the ACNA's new Prayer Book be without fault.

In addition, I am also a recent member of the Catechetical Task Force, whose goal is to produce a Catechesis that will be creedal, rooted in Scripture, and draw on the history of catechetical practice and earlier catechisms (not only Protestant, but also the current Roman Catholic Catechism) as well as recent catechetical scholarship. We believed that a more robust catechetical formation will do much to creating Christian disciples, as opposed to mere pew sitters.

The question of Women's Ordination is a different, although related question. I do not have time to address it in a short reply, but I would say that WO is far from the clear cut black and white issue that its opponents make it out to be. It is entirely a different matter from such issues as homosexual practice (which is clearly and univocally condemned)

throughout the Bible, or central creedal dogmas (the Trinity, the incarnation, the bodily resurrection of Christ) that are necessary implications of the plain reading of Scripture. The question of WO is, then, a question of whether or not this practice (like the practice of creating a liturgy in English) falls within the freedom of the church, or whether there is something inherent to the ontology of ordination that makes the ordination of women impossible. That is a theological question, and not one that can be addressed simply by pointing to previous practice.

As for the Assumption and IC, these are dogmas (not matters of church polity and practice). They have no basis in a plain sense reading of Scripture, nor are they, like the Nicene and Chalcedonian dogmas, necessary implications of what Scripture teaches. Moreover, as historical developments, they are separated from the apostolic period by centuries. As such, it is implausible to argue that they are the products of an unbroken unwritten tradition.

Finally, I believe that the church has been given the task of guarding the Apostolic Deposit of Faith. At the same time, we are successors to the apostles, not apostles. As such, the church is not infallible. This gives a certain freedom. It allows that the church has made mistakes in the past, and will necessarily make mistakes in the future. But it also means that such mistakes are, at least in principle, correctible.

Grace and Peace,

Bill Witt

P.S. By coincidence, I also receive today a copy of an inquiry addressed to the Liturgical Committee by a lay person who was concerned that the new ACNA Prayer Book might be guilty of teaching the heretical Roman Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration. To the contrary, I would argue that "baptismal regeneration" is the historic doctrine of Anglicanism. It was

clearly embraced by the Anglican Reformers, and is the teaching of the historic Prayer Books, 1549, 1552, 1559, 1662, and American 1928.

Given Fr. \_\_\_\_\_ 's apparent affirmation of the Assumption and Immaculate Conception, I would doubt that he would have any objections to baptismal regeneration. Nonetheless, as the contrast between these two inquiries (both arriving on the same day) makes clear, it is impossible to make everyone happy all the time.