

Practical Applications of the BCP
Fr. Owen Williams (Lecture #2)
 -A Synopsis-
Clericus, Alfred, Maine, June 16, 2011

Under Henry VIII, church services remained in Latin. When Abp. Cranmer contemplated a workable English prayer book (a “book of common prayer”) useable by all Christians, he wanted to unite in one text all needful elements historically present in Church practice. This would include a detailed and comprehensive Calendar; a list of all the prayers (the “Hours”) of the day, i.e. a Breviary; a Missal, containing appropriate texts for the Mass; Practicum, with specific instructions to clergy for all types of services and situations; the Psalms (the Church’s historic source for prayer); a Teaching Office (a Catechism); and standardized Rules of clerical deportment.

Cranmer’s goal, in compiling the BCP of 1549, was fourfold: 1. To provide services in language understood by the people; 2. To simplify the Breviary to only two daily prayer offices for general use among the faithful (See Morning and Evening Prayer, and the Lectionary, as BCP examples); 3. To include a “pontifical” portion to instruct the Bishop in his many duties; and 4. To standardize and unify Church practice throughout the Realm. The Lectionary would serve to teach Scripture to the people, allowing it to be read through regularly and systematically. It is truly an amazing book, because of what it can do.

Fr. Williams took us through the BCP to show how successful Cranmer was in meeting his goals. In most cases, a blank page introduces a new section of the BCP, corresponding to the “needful elements” listed above. Following are a few relevant comments: The 1549 book contains no numbering of verses, because the later Geneva Bible was the first to include this. The “Parish Book”, for instance, begins on p. 271. Note the special “Churching of Women” Ceremony, the product of an age in which death in childbirth was more common. Regarding the Psalms, they should not be “rushed” in recitation. [Dcn. Al Ryan noted that asterisks mark places of significant pause, so “our hearts and minds can catch up with our tongues”. Fr. Sam Logan reminded us that the purpose of a monthly calendar of psalm readings is to *internalize* them.] The Catechism is “a tried and true manner to learn the faith”. The “Offices of Instruction” can be offered as an actual church service “at least once a year”. “Family Prayers” (not Cranmer’s idea) provide heads of household a chance to exercise their spiritual responsibility for the home. They can be added to the Morning and Evening Prayer services. The “39 Articles” should be “read as they’re written”. Pay attention to the “buts”. Technically, there are only 38 (#21 is not an article). Fr. Williams recommends an on-line PDF document: *The Archbishop’s Test*, as a perspective on the BCP. This wonderful booklet is an excellent and powerful read (though the on-line text needs some editing).