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The Conduct of Public Worship*

THE title is not altogether satisfactory. What I propose to speak about is the conduct of public worship apart from the sermon. Yet of course, as we all know, the sermon itself can be an act of worship. Sometimes it is instruction in some aspect of the Christian Faith or an evangelistic appeal, and these we do not usually think of as worship, though they may be. But the sermon may be a proclamation of the goodness and greatness of God the Father almighty; a lifting up of Christ crucified and risen; a contemplation of the work of God through His Spirit in the human soul. It may lead the congregation in praise and thanksgiving into the presence of God.

So in asking you to turn your thoughts away from preaching I am not forgetting that the sermon too may be an act of worship in the strictest sense, and I am certainly not seeking to depreciate it. But I am trying to exalt the importance of prayer and praise in the weekly assembly in the Lord's house on the Lord's day. And while in our tradition we have always had a high sense of the value of the sermon we have been sometimes—*are* sometimes, I fear I must say —too casual about these other essentials in public worship. So far as we are so we are not really being true to our heritage, as I could easily show if there were time. Perhaps there has been an improvement of late. At any rate I hope we have heard the last of that dreadful word "preliminaries" as applied to the praise and prayer of God's people, as if the sermon were the be-all and the end-all of public worship.

Both together are needed. Neither is more important than the other, and to indulge in comparisons is of no value or help to anyone. Certainly the conduct of public worship, in the sense in which I am using the words, should be taken as seriously and prepared for as thoroughly as the sermon: and many of us find it the more difficult and exacting part of the service.

* Given in substance as an address to the Lay Preachers' Federation on May 1st, 1957.

Let us remind ourselves of what worship is and of what it involves. Von Hugel said "religion is adoration," which is to say much the same as the great words of the Shorter Catechism, "the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever." Adoration means that we rejoice in God, just because He is God, in the perfection of His beauty, goodness and love. We bring our Father the well-deserved love of His children. We affirm our trust in Him, as worthy to receive glory and honour and power. How few among men are worthy to receive honour and power, but He is absolutely worthy. This is the fundamenal meaning of worship: the recognition of the absolute worth of God. The mind cannot think nor the heart desire anything better than He is. Our Father, hallowed be Thy name!

God comes first in worship, not our own states of mind. Worship is an acknowledgement of His great acts in Christ and of His claims upon us. It seeks fellowship with God. It is an endeavour to open all our being to His beauty, goodness and love. It is an encounter between the Divine Spirit and the human spirit. And it is based upon the faith that He welcomes our coming, that He is not reluctant to bless or to forgive, but more ready to hear than we are to pray, more ready to give than we to receive. He stands at the door of our souls, knocking.

Worship is thus not only a seeking of God. Even more truly it is giving God an opportunity of finding us. It is to open the door at which He is knocking. He is always seeking and speaking: we so seldom stop to listen. In worship we put ourselves into an attitude of receptiveness.

It is to *our* Father that we come. The worst of all definitions of religion is that dictum of Whitehead that used to be widely quoted with approval: "Religion is what a man does with his solitariness." There is, of course, an element of truth here, and one that has been much emphasised among us. Religion, we say, is an affair between a man and his God. No other, we insist sternly, must "interfere." Assuredly there is need for the response of heart and will to God that each man must make for himself. Believers' Baptism, from one point of view, is a witness to that. But all this is barely half the truth. No man is alone. He is not solitary in coming to the point of decision; he has been led there by home and friends and Church. He is not alone in making his decision. Thank God, he is not solitary in living the Christian life. What a poor job we should make of it if that were so. There is an essential place for private prayer, but the heights of worship are scaled in company. It is with all the saints that we learn, if we ever do, the secrets of the love of God. Nor is it earthly company alone. It is with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven that we laud and magnify His glorious name. Worship is a corporate act of the con-

gregation as a whole, and the congregation worships as the representative there of the whole Church of Christ in many lands and in the heavenly places. We worship as members of Christ's Church.

We must hold together in our minds and in our practice two apparently contradictory aspects of public worship. First comes the adoration of the living God for His goodness, trustworthiness, redeeming mercy, continued activity and availability. We turn from the complexities and problems of the world to rest and rejoice in God's changeless love. We lift our eyes to the hills away from the roughness of the road at our feet. But worship is not complete unless it is also a search for God's will for the world and a renewal of our dedication to the service of His Kingdom: a realisation that in all the joys and stresses of human life, at home, in the shop, the factory, the school, the council chamber, He is concerned and must be served. In daily life our thoughts cannot be constantly upon God, though we must seek to do all according to His will. But when we gather for worship we are deliberately directing our minds and hearts to Him, recalling the Presence in which we live and move and have our being at all times. We dedicate our churches for the worship of God, not because He dwells only there and other places are unholy, but that we may learn to hallow them all. We set apart special times for worship, not because other times are outside the rule of God, but that we may learn to consecrate all our hours and days. The cooker in the kitchen, the workman's bench, the office desk, have their place in life and religion as well as the altar. The hour of worship should give tone and meaning and direction to all the other activities of life. This integration of life into worship and of worship into life must never be forgotten.

PLANNING THE SERVICE

It is with such an understanding of the meaning of public worship that we shall plan each service, giving their due place to hymns, prayers, Scripture reading, sermon, and the rest. It is sometimes said that the whole service should follow some one theme. This does not seem to me desirable. At the great festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, it is natural and proper that there should be such a unity. Normally, however, the varying needs of the congregation and the desire to provide for the different elements of worship will be our guide. Bearing in mind the double reference of worship which we have just discussed, we shall start with a hymn of adoration and praise, and somewhere we shall include a hymn of the Kingdom concerned with the coming of God's rule in the world, and a hymn also on the personal Christian life. The hymn after the sermon, and perhaps the one before it also, will be related to the subject of the sermon. In the eighteenth century, when congregational hymn singing was becoming more general, it was not

unusual for a minister who had or thought he had gifts in that direction, to compose a hymn to be sung after the sermon to press home its message. Some of the hymns of Doddridge, for example, were so written. I am not suggesting that we should indulge in this practice ourselves, but the relation of hymn to message is good. We shall choose our hymns with a sense of responsibility and certainly never leave the choice until the last minute or to the organist. There are some hymns in our own book which ought never to be sung again and others which are unsuitable for the present hour. There should be nothing haphazard about our selection; the hymns may make a deeper impression than our sermon.

The Scripture lesson also should normally be related to the theme of the sermon. We ought to prepare carefully for its reading, making sure that we understand it and can read it as if we did understand it, with the proper emphasis, and not as if we did not know what was coming next but were only feeling our way. We should read it over aloud at home as part of our preparation. To help the congregation to understand it is nearly always a great gain to use a modern translation, preferably the Revised Standard Version. We ought not to read the Bible dramatically and declaimingly, but with reverence and feeling and understanding—and with audibility. The reading of the Lesson should be one of the greatest and most impressive moments of the service. The hour will not have been spent in vain if we can make some great passage come alive for the hearers.

In the leading of corporate prayer the minister is confronted with a task that is more difficult than preaching. He has to become the mouthpiece and representative of the congregation as a whole; yet so as to make the prayer real for the individual. He "has to address God yet to be overheard by men"*; more, he has to speak on behalf of the men who are overhearing him. He may have the greatest variety of needs represented in the congregation, the young and the old, the happy and the sorrowful, the anxious, those burdened with sin and those overflowing with the joy of life. What a great gift it is to be able to lead a company of worshippers into the presence of God, to speak on their behalf with reality and spiritual understanding, to lift up their hearts in prayer. As we have to learn to preach, by study and by practice and by waiting upon God, so quite as much do we need to learn to conduct corporate prayer; by private prayer and by the study of the Bible and of what the Holy Spirit has taught the Church in the later centuries, by learning from the experience and the practice of others.

Our public prayers need to be prepared carefully in advance, not only in their content but also in their wording, at least in general outline. The Holy Spirit can as truly guide that preparation

* R. H. Coates, *The Realm of Prayer*, p. 212.

as He can our speech in the pulpit. There is no argument for preparing the sermon which does not apply to preparing the prayers. It is no more irreverent to read a prayer than to commit it to memory. If we may use notes in preaching we may use notes in praying. This, of course, brings us face to face with Free Church principles, or prejudices, against the use of written prayers in public worship. In fact the use of forms of prayer is to be found as far back as we can go in the history of the Church, even to the New Testament itself. Our Lord used the Psalms to give words to His prayers on the Cross, and He taught His disciples to use the Lord's Prayer. There are forms of prayer in the earliest Christian documents, such as the *Didache*. So it is impossible to contend that their use is always and essentially wrong.

Nevertheless we are the inheritors here of an old dispute. In protest against the shortcomings of Anglican worship in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries some of our forefathers went too far. Because antiphonal singing by choirs can be formal and mechanical they banished all music and singing from public worship, though many of them delighted in music in what they thought its proper place. Because read prayers can be unreal and unrelated to the present needs of a congregation they accused all forms of prayer of quenching the Spirit. Some even went so far as to disallow the reading of Scripture itself in public worship.

None of us today would go as far as such extremists. I emphasize the word 'extremists' because it is certainly not true to say sweepingly that our Puritan forefathers were all against liturgical worship. Geneva itself had its service book. Some in England pleaded for a revised Prayer Book with liberty for free prayer. But they were justifiably critical of the existing Prayer Book and rightly objected to its rigid imposition. Today there is an encouraging readiness on the part of all—Anglican and Free Church—to learn from each other and to use the best of both traditions. Both have merits and both have dangers.

Most of us start with convictions as to the defects of what may be called for short prayer book worship. It seems to us too formal and restricting. As Isaac Watts put it: "When we continually tread one constant road of sentences, they become like an old beaten path in which we daily travel, and we are ready to walk on without particular notice of the several parts of the way; so in our daily repetition of a form we neglect due attention to the full use of the words." There is danger, we feel, of insincerity in repeating prayers which are not then really true for us and our present situation. We need freedom to attend to current events. And many of the prayers are couched in outmoded words and phraseology. Free prayer, in contrast, is simple, direct and spontaneous, and relevant to the hour.

But there are assets to be set on the other side of the account.

The use of a liturgy frees the congregation from the peculiarities of the individual minister and ensures a proper balance in the service. It provides a frame which is the result of generations of experience into which the worshipper can fit the expression of his own needs. It aids the minister also in lifting from him a burden which few can carry in either spiritual insight or power of expression. For we cannot deny the possibility of formality and unreality, and the use of stereotyped phrases and ideas in extemporary prayer. Unpremeditated prayer can be ill-balanced, repetitive and at the mercy of the mood of the moment. The studied informality and heartiness of some preachers jars upon many quite as much as the apparent formality of a liturgical service. Some people have left us on that account, and many who are still with us have expressed their liking for the order and dignity of the liturgy. The congregation know what is coming and the familiar and beautiful words are consecrated by centuries of Christian devotion and by the personal associations of the individual worshipper. The oft trodden path may be well loved and full of inexhaustible interest. It is urged, too, that the use of the same liturgy throughout the Church in its different congregations is a perpetual reminder of the place of the local congregation in the larger whole. The arguments are certainly not all on one side.

Isaac Watts was a strong believer in the value of free prayer, but drew an important distinction between that and extemporary prayer, meaning by that prayer which is, as it were, made up on the spot. In his *Guide to Prayer,* which is a valuable discussion of the whole issue, he deprecates the "two extremes" into which "zealots" have been betrayed. Some will worship God in no other way than by set forms. "Other violent men in extreme opposition have indulged in irregular wanderings of thought and expression." He urges that each needs to learn from the other. "I have sought a middle way between the distant mistakes of contending Christians." We must avoid the extremes of either confining ourselves entirely to pre-composed forms of prayer, or, on the other hand, of an entire dependence on "sudden motions and suggestions," or as we might say, on the inspiration of the moment. He points out that because we do not use forms it does not follow that we must pray without any premeditation. Free prayer is not necessarily extemporary. It is free prayer when we prepare the substance beforehand with some regard to the expression also. Some "greatly gifted" people can pray in public without preparation and sudden occasions may arise which have to be met. But preparation beforehand is normally very necessary. "An affair of such solemnity and importance which requires out utmost care to perform it well, can't be done without some forethought." Common sense tells us that and Scripture nowhere forbids it. It is certainly necessary to prepare the heart.

More than that we must make sure that we do not omit any essential element in prayer. We should both plan the course of our prayers and make sure that our language is "easy to be understood by those that join with us and most proper to excite and maintain our own devotion and theirs." And he draws at length a picture of what may happen to the minister who prays without preparation, in incoherence and the use of words that are "very little to the purpose." Such things "have given great offence to the pious and been a stumbling-block and scandal to the profane."

While he is against the limitation of ourselves to "a constant set form of words," he is sure that study of Scripture and of books of devotion can do much to guide us and "furnish us with proper praying language," "And I wish the assistance which might be borrowed thence were not as superstitiously abandoned by some persons as they are idolised by others." It is "both lawful and convenient for weaker Christians to use forms in prayer. . . . I grant also that sometimes the most improved saints may find their own wants and desires . . . so happily expressed in the words of other men that they cannot find better and may therefore in a very pious manner use the same, especially when they labour under a present deadness of spirit and great indisposition for the duty. It is also evident that many assistances may be borrowed from forms of prayer well composed without the use of the whole form as a prayer."

Watts surely speaks with wisdom. While we ought never to give up our heritage of free prayer, we ought to recognize that there is room for improvement in our use of it. There are reforms I should like to advocate, all of them in practice amongst us already, but not sufficiently widely.

CO-OPERATION

It is very desirable to give a larger share to the congregation. It is curious that with all our emphasis on the priesthood of all believers we should give a smaller part in our services to the congregation than does the Church of England. For generations the only audible part taken by Baptist congregations, with rare exceptions, has been the singing of the hymns and the repetition of the Lord's Prayer. Even the Amens at the end of the prayers which the Puritans urged should be said by the people in accordance with Scripture are left, rather meaninglessly, to the minister. Our congregations are much too passive. For them to take a more active vocal part would make for more real worship and for unity of spirit and concentration of mind, as in the recitation of the General Thanksgiving or Confession, or in prayers with responses. There is much to be said also for alternate Scripture reading as practised in many of our churches in America and the Dominions.

My second reform is the breaking up of the "long" omnibus prayer, which it is hard to defend. It is both too long and too miscellaneous, putting together as it does thanksgiving, petition, penitence and intercession. For prayers to be joined in with reality and understanding by most people they need to be short. To quote Watts once again: "God is not the more pleased with prayers merely because they are long, nor are Christians ever the more edified." Even more important than the question of length is the fact that the average worshipper finds it difficult to follow the windings of the preacher's mind in the long prayer; it is hard for him suddenly to switch his mind to another theme without warning. A change that can be introduced without too drastic an innovation is to divide the long prayer up by "headings"; "Let us offer our thanksgiving to God our Father"; "Let us confess our sins"; "Let us bring our intercessions to God." And no section should itself be long, not because there is not much for which to give thanks or much to confess, but in the interests of real prayer. Where it can be introduced there is much to be said in favour of what is usually called guided intercession, the minister saying: "Let us pray for . . ." followed by a period of silence, after which he offers a brief prayer or says "Lord, hear our prayer," to which the people respond, "And let our cry come unto Thee." And let *the people* say "Amen."

Again, we should use our freedom to draw at suitable points on the great treasury of the prayers of the saints of the past. Properly chosen they can be of much help, and will also serve to remind us, as do our hymns, of the long succession of the Church of Christ through the ages. If we do not use them in the pulpit we should at least use them in private, not only because of the enrichment of our own spiritual life but to help us in framing our public prayers—as in preaching we learn from reading the sermons of others. If the Anglicans can learn from the Free Church tradition, and they can learn and are learning, certainly we Free Churchmen can learn from them. The ideal blend of free and liturgical prayer is hard to achieve but it is worth striving for.

I also wish greatly that we could learn the value of silence in public worship—of listening and not only speaking. I know Free Churches where definite periods of silence are provided during the service, and they are much appreciated. But we can all give time for an individual to offer his own petition, as when we pray for the sick and those in any special need and add, "especially those whom we name in the silence of our hearts." The Quaker meeting is not the best way of worship for most of us. It demands too much. But I am sure that we need more silence.

In the conduct of public worship we need to remember that prayer is manifold and that in the course of a service there should

be a place for adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition and intercession. It is customary and proper to open the service with a prayer, preceded by sentences of Scripture. What is the right note to strike then? On principle we might be inclined to say penitence and confession, but we must remember that most of the congregation arrive at church without much preparation for worship. Their minds are steeped in things of this world. They are, perhaps, tired and anxious. The opening prayer should surely be one of adoration and reverent approach, a remembrance of the presence of God in His majesty and love, a prayer for the awakening of our sluggish hearts, that the Holy Spirit may quicken our receptiveness and responsiveness. It is fitting to close this with a repetition of the Lord's Prayer in which the congregation join, and, in my judgment, it is better said than sung. This opening act of prayer should unify and solemnise the congregation.

If we realize the presence of God we shall also realize our unworthiness to be there. We shall confess our own sins and those of the society in which we live; men of unclean lips we dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. And in both our confession and our intercession we should avoid vague generalities. We need, I believe, to be specific and down to earth. Some of our public praying is too abstract and rarified. I have known whole services in which no reference was made to the critical state of the world and the anxieties inevitably pressing on all our minds. Worship, as we have seen, should be concentration for a limited time on the spiritual reality which ought to be the basis and guide of all life. Our whole attitude to life depends upon our ultimate beliefs about God. But we come from daily life to worship, and we go back from worship to daily life. We must try to integrate them, and in that our confession and our intercession have their part to play.

I said at the outset that worship is a co-operative act of the whole congregation. Only by such co-operation can there be public worship at all. How dependent we preachers are upon the state of heart and mind of those to whom we minister. One congregation welcomes us with a devout and serious spirit: they were glad it was said to them, "Let us go to the house of the Lord." But another chills us with its coldness and lack of co-operation. Let that remind us that the chief preparation we have to make for the conduct of public worship is the preparation of ourselves, our own hearts. No man can lead public prayer who does not pray in private, and who has not prayed his way through every detail of the whole service beforehand in the quiet of his own home.

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