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Our Sunday Services: Are They Too Long?

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VARIOUS answers will be given to this question, according to the various types to whom it may be addressed. The careless, perfunctory Church-goer, who satisfies his conscience or the expectations of Society by making an appearance at Public Worship once on Sunday, will probably answer a decided "Yes." On the other hand, the earnest middle aged or elderly Churchman will probably say "No;" in some instances, because he really feels that the time spent in the House of God is all too short; in other instances, because the Conservatism, which seems inbred in most Churchmen, resents any modification of the services; possibly in a few cases because, if he gives an affirmative reply, he fears he may be thought to undervalue the privilege of prayer.

We are not called, however, in our *Sunday* services to think only of the elect few who find no difficulty in concentrating their attention for a long period; we have to seek to help and edify the average man in the pew; we are bound to make greater efforts to check the tide of absenteeism which, as every census of attendance shows, has grown apace in the last decade, and we cannot disregard our Lord's command to go out into the "highways and hedges" and by all reasonable and legitimate means to "compel them to come in."

It will hardly be open to dispute that the present age is less patient and less long-suffering than its predecessors. Prolixity in conversation or literature is resented. The "short story" takes the place of the lengthy serial. The news of each day is provided for us in a concentrated form. Mainly owing to the multiplicity of subjects which invite our interest, we seem to be less capable than our forefathers of prolonged attention. We may deplore this tendency; but it exists, however much we may deplore it. Times change; circumstances change. Is

the Church alone to remain stationary, like an anchored boat, which does but show the rapidity of the current that is running past it?

In the Preface to the Prayer-Book the compilers state that "upon weighty and important considerations, according to the various exigencies of times and occasions, such changes and alterations should be made as to those that are in a place of authority should from time to time either seem necessary or convenient." Apparently there was never any intention on the part of the reformers that the structure of the Prayer-Book should be crystallized for all time, or that any future improvement in the way of modification, curtailment, or addition, should be deemed impossible. With many earnest souls the conviction is growing that the "exigency" of the present time is calling for important changes in the Prayer-Book. Modifications in the phraseology are needed. Additions of various prayers and special services are still more urgently needed. On these points, however, this paper will be silent; its aim is simply a plea for the shortening of our services.

In one department of Public Worship we have already recognized the call for curtailment. The modern *Sermon* is shorter than the Sermon of our childhood's day. Fifty years ago the average length of a Sermon was not less than half an hour; *now* a Sermon of thirty minutes' duration is rare, except in famous pulpits like St. Paul's or in a University Church, and the average in the Church of England is probably well under twenty minutes. In former days a long exordium used to tell who said the text, and why, and where, and to whom he said it; now we commonly plunge at once *in medias res*, and leave much of the application to the hearers. The demand for short Sermons is not altogether a healthy one, and the Sermonette of eight or ten minutes rarely makes, and perhaps is not expected to make, any deep impression. Sunday is the only day on which most of our worshippers receive any spiritual instruction, for week-day Sermons, which of late have been enormously multiplied, seldom attract any considerable number of hearers,

and these are almost entirely of one sex. It is, therefore, to be regretted that often so little care is bestowed on the *Sunday* Sermon both as regards quantity and quality, and the absence of men, which is more marked in Church than in Chapel, is, we believe, largely due to this cause.

The shortening of the Morning Sermon, however, which has been a marked feature in our time, is due in part to the length of the preceding service. When the service is held, as it commonly is, at 11 a.m., the Sermon rarely begins much before noon, and by this time the worshippers are tired, and, unless the preacher be of exceptional interest, they are not disposed to give him a lengthened hearing.

It may be said that the clergyman is not bound to have Morning Prayer, Litany, and Holy Communion in close conjunction, and that if they are separated, as they often are, the length of any one service is not excessive. In towns and cities the Litany is now commonly read in the afternoon, with the somewhat unfortunate result that it is never heard by any except the few elderly ladies and others who form an afternoon congregation. The Holy Communion is also in many places used only as a separate service. This cannot be regarded as entirely satisfactory when it is remembered that children and others who do not communicate are deprived of hearing the Epistle and Gospel—*i.e.*, the most distinctive teaching of the Sunday. But there are thousands of parishes where this severance is difficult or impossible. Many a country clergyman cannot afford to read the Litany in the afternoon to an empty church when he has other more important duties in school or class. Owing to the exigencies of distance, etc., he is also compelled to have the Holy Communion at midday rather than at some earlier hour. Is not, therefore, the power to shorten Morning Prayer one of the reforms most urgently needed, either in order that the Holy Communion Service—which is, after all, the more important service—shall begin within a reasonable time, or in order that occasionally the morning congregation may be able to join in the Litany? Strong efforts have been made of late to inculcate

the superior merit of early Communion; but there will always be a considerable number of people who, very reasonably, prefer to communicate at midday, and it may be questioned whether they would not join in the Communion Service with greater freshness, and greater benefit, if it were preceded by a less lengthy service than that which is usual at present.

The following suggestions are made for the shortening of Morning, and possibly Evening, Prayer :

1. It would seem desirable that the Exhortation should be either omitted or abbreviated. There is no need to remind a congregation 52 or 104 times a year of the purpose for which they meet together. As a matter of fact, the words receive little attention from the worshippers, and in some places are so whined or so gabbled that they are not likely to excite it. Through general consent the longer Exhortations in the Holy Communion are almost invariably omitted, even by the most law-abiding of Bishops. Why should not a similar abridgment be ordered or silently sanctioned in the less important service?

2. Our present use of the Psalter is indefensible. Apart from the incongruousness of certain Psalms for certain seasons—*e.g.*, the use of jubilant Psalms in Lent, or the 51st Psalm when Easter Monday happens to fall on April 10—the present mode of recitation is altogether too long for real edification. We should never think of singing four or five hymns in rapid succession. For the first five mornings of the month the Psalms, with the *Venite* and *Glorias*, contain an average of over sixty verses, and a recitation of sixty verses is, we consider, too much for average use. Surely, at any rate on such Sunday mornings when the Holy Communion follows Morning Prayer, a very much shorter selection might be sanctioned, and this selection regulated not merely by the day of the month, but by the intrinsic fitness of certain Psalms for the expression of common prayer or common praise.

3. It may well be thought that some of the Lessons are of undue length. The whole Lectionary needs revision, and, should it be revised, it is not irreverent to indulge a hope that

the question of length may be considered. At present, some of the longest and least helpful chapters in the Bible from the Historical Books are read on the hot Sundays of July and August.

4. In a growing number of churches it is considered the proper thing to use the *Benedicite* through Lent and Advent. It is time that a strong protest should be made against this tendency. Anything more unsuitable than *Benedicite* for a penitential season it is difficult to imagine. There is not a single minor note therein from beginning to end. But, in addition to its unsuitability, and its somewhat wearisome iteration of the same phrase, it unduly lengthens the service at a period when the first Lessons are of exceptional length, and when it is desirable that the Litany should be regularly used on Sunday mornings.

5. The use of the "Athanasian Creed" touches a question of doctrine, and with doctrine this paper does not propose to deal. But it may be asked whether on Easter Day and other great festivals of the Church, when it is desirable that the midday Communion should not be too long deferred, it is well to lengthen Morning Prayer by its recitation.

6. When the Holy Communion Office follows Morning Prayer, it is surely unnecessary to use the Lord's Prayer a second time in the earlier service, or to use any of the prayers which follow the Third Collect. The substance of all the latter prayers is contained in the Church Militant prayer and other parts of the Holy Communion Office, and the repetition is neither satisfactory nor edifying.

Passing from Morning Prayer to the Office for the Administration of Holy Communion, it may be remarked that, while the need of abbreviation has already been shown by the customary omission of the longer Exhortations, further modifications in this direction may be desirable.

7. It may, for instance, be thought by some that a solemn recitation of the Two Commandments as quoted in the New Testament might well be used as an alternative to the Ten Commandments of the Old. The repetition of a ten times

repeated *Kyrie*, drawn out sometimes to abnormal length by music *rallentando* to the point of weariness, is not altogether helpful.

8. The Collect for the Sovereign which follows the Commandments is altogether unnecessary in view of the prayer for the Church Militant, especially if prayer has already been made for the King after the Third Collect. These repeated petitions for the Sovereign are a severe tax on loyalty and unsuited for an age whose conceptions of monarchy are very different from the views common during the Stuart dynasty. Can anything be more indefensible than that in village churches, where three services are often necessarily combined, we should pray for the Sovereign no less than five times within the space of two hours?

9. A permissible shortening of the Words of Administration to Communicants is urgently needed when there are exceptionally large numbers. At a church within a mile from the place where this article is written there were 420 Communicants at 8 a.m. last Easter morning, in spite of four other opportunities for Communion. Is it possible to administer severally with reverence and deliberateness when the words have to be repeated so often? Is not the result weariness to the congregation, and are we to be surprised that at this particular service barely a third were present for the concluding prayers? Surely some change is needed to prevent undue length on such occasions. The recitation of all the words to each railful is, of course, possible, and those who have done so assure us that the result is impressive. But many prefer the personal recitation to each individual, which is evidently contemplated in the rubric. May we not justly claim that where the number exceeds, say, fifty to each officiating clergyman, power should be granted to use only part of the prescribed formula? It would be clearly understood that this was not done for any doctrinal purpose, and that the abbreviation was only sanctioned when the numbers made it a convenience or a necessity.

It is not probable that the reader will agree with *all* the suggestions made in these pages: but that some modification is needed, most of those who have been born in the last fifty years

will admit. Among the unfortunate results produced by too lengthy services the following may be mentioned :

1. Gabbling and indecent haste in the recitation of the Prayers and the reading of the Lessons. In this, *Non multa sed multum* should be our motto. Our Lord uttered His protest against "long prayers" devoid of sincerity, and "vain repetitions."

2. The substitution of the Sermonette for the Sermon.

3. The almost invariable disregard of the rubric that Holy Baptism should be administered in Morning or Evening Prayer "when the most number of people come together." The main reason for this complete disregard is probably that the Baptismal office unduly lengthens the service. Might it not be possible, once a quarter, that one Lesson and one Canticle should be omitted in order that the people might have a periodic object-lesson on their initiation into the Christian Society?

4. A feeling of weariness on the part of many children and others who are unable to enter into long and sustained devotions. It is idle to say that men can sit for three hours without feeling tired at a concert or a theatre. Such attendance makes little demand on the mental and spiritual faculties, and bears no comparison with attendance at a religious service, which varies little from one end of the year to the other.

5. A disinclination, except on the part of very devout souls, to remain frequently for Communion. Some, of course, object to any Communion after breakfast; but to the large number who rightly have no such scruples, the length of Morning Prayer is, we are persuaded, a barrier to frequent reception and too often the idea is current that 11 a.m. Morning Prayer is the essential thing, the Holy Communion an appendage which may be dispensed with according to taste.

6. Lastly, it is not improbable that, if ever we are to make any effectual attempt to regain the "lapsed masses" to our services, the regular attendants must be prepared in certain places to submit to some alteration in our evening services.

In many ignorant or neglected districts a simple Liturgical

service on the lines of Evening Prayer, but so short that it may be printed on two sides of a card, is much more likely to attract and to help non-Church-goers than is a service, which, however excellent, is puzzling to an outsider, and sometimes, because he does not understand it, repellent.

The question of Prayer-Book revision has now reached the sphere of practical politics. If the granting of "Letters of Business" is simply to issue in the toleration of Vestments, many thoughtful minds will regret that a great opportunity was lost, and some will indignantly feel that it was altogether misused. Additional services, additional prayers are urgently needed—prayers for Missions, for Commerce, for Confirmation Candidates, etc. *But the present length of our services will preclude additions on Sundays unless there be some corresponding subtraction.* If by removing Exhortations which have lost their force, or needless repetitions of the same supplications, or by reducing selections from the Psalter to a more reasonable length, the services of our Church can be improved, why should we hesitate to seek their improvement? No doctrinal change is involved in the suggestions given in this article. They are simply the requirements of common sense. It may be well to "stand in the old paths," but even the best of roads occasionally need remaking; and, after all, we are not simply called to "stand," we are called also to "go forward." If the Spirit of the living God is urging us not to acquiesce in the present religious or irreligious state of the nation, but to adapt our methods to the legitimate needs of the times, it is faithlessness and cowardice on our part if we refuse to listen to His Voice.

Postscript.—This article was written before the recent publication of the (preliminary) Report of the Committee of the Lower House of Canterbury Convocation on the subject of Revision. The Recommendations of the Committee endorse the suggestions in this paper, numbered 6, 7, and 9. In my opinion, far more is needed in the way of curtailment. Still, I am thankful that these few Recommendations of the Committee seem likely to win acceptance in Convocation, and I trust that the outside agitation against any Revision may not succeed in rendering them ineffectual.