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Worship

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(This paper was prepared to introduce a discussion at the monthly meeting of ministers at Haworth in March, 1941.)

“ ANYBODY can make sermons, but it takes a saint of God to lead the worship of the people.” (W. B. Selbie, quoted in “Christian Worship” ed. N. Micklem, p. 241.)

There is no need to labour the point regarding the importance of the subject which I am to try to introduce. I shall try to treat it from a severely practical point of view, since we are all called to lead frequently the worship of a congregation. Unhappily, it cannot be treated “objectively,” and this paper must be to some extent a confession of one’s own ideals. The quotation above is a good starting point, though I would not credit “anybody” with such ability to make sermons. It is, however, certain that it is good for people to be moved by stirring discourse, but better far to be led in giving themselves to God by adoring and thankful worship. After all, Herod heard John Baptist preach, and heard him gladly, but in his case there was no worship in which the life was dedicated to God, as the necessary climax of the glad hearing.

Let it be said then, first, that no disparagement of preaching is implied in this short paper ; and next, that it assumes various methods as permissible in worship. To this duty of worship and of leading worship however, we unconsciously bring not merely preferences, but deep-rooted prejudices. If in what is here written undue preference seems to be given to liturgical worship, it can be attributed to the fact that the Book of Common Prayer is part of my very life.

I. *What is Worship?* There are at least two things which must be noted : (a) awareness of God ; (b) a fitting response on our part to this awareness.

Christian Worship means that the God of whom we are aware is the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we have free access to the Father ; and means too that the response on our part is the response of man's spirit, or rather (to use a more modern expression) of the *whole* man, and all this is on the plane and within the realm of truth as opposed to both unreality and error.

In this way, using worship in this sense, we realize that in it we are serving God, and that the act of worship is rightly called "divine service." Remembrance of this would "frae mony a blunder free us." Our worship is an offering to God and is not primarily (perhaps not secondarily) for the conscious satisfaction of the worshippers ; such satisfaction comes indeed, but is incidental.

It is further something which is of *obligation*. In the grand and simple words of the Church of England Catechism, "My duty towards God is to worship Him. . . ." Though private devotions, family worship, and the worship of smaller fellowships within the larger fellowship all contribute to the great offering of the Church's worship, we can now only think of public worship as that phrase is usually understood.

2. *AWARENESS of God's presence.* How is this to be obtained ? For one thing, the place of meeting should be suggestive of God's presence and help greatly towards awareness. The very arrangement of the house of prayer can help. Reverent use of this suggestiveness is to be commended, and may well be carried much further than in the past. There is no virtue in bareness, and I often wonder whether it is not a psychological mistake—however justifiable on other grounds—to build a place of worship as a preaching house. This suggestion may provoke dissent, but to set the man who leads the worship in eminence in the centre is questionable, and the implication that worship consists in hearing sermons is not one which will win much assent.

At once, however, we need to supplement this statement with the fine words of the Evangelical poet Cowper :

For Thou, within no walls confined,
Inhabitest the humble mind. . . .

While bareness (and its opposite) cannot guarantee spiritu-

ality, the reverent mind of the worshipper is always of first rate importance.

Posture, too, means something. There is much to be said for the bowed head and kneeling, in these days when reverence is so hard to ensure. I say this, too, as one who cannot kneel much in private prayer. What I can, perhaps, call picturehouse behaviour, and inattention, are enemies against which we must fight with every means at our disposal.

I may say at this point that I find no use for much of the traditional apparatus of devotion, e.g., the crucifix and dim religious light. Yet I wonder whether we ought not to try to find some Protestant equivalent for the Stations of the Cross, both for artistic reasons and even more for stimulus to devotion.

3. *Our response to awareness of God.* Here it is fitting to remember the words of Habakkuk and Isaiah, "The Lord is in His Holy Temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him." "With (two wings the seraph) did cover his face, with twain he did cover his feet and with twain he did fly." Silent adoration may often be more fitting than the noisy action which generally passes for worship. The demand for bustle and even boisterousness in worship which is sometimes made is misguided and needs correction by Biblical standards. At the opposite end, we can ask (with the late Dean Beching) whether St. Paul can be imagined as giving a place to the ceremoniarium in his list of the officers of the Church.

A. This leads naturally to consideration of the place of *silence* in worship. It has to be remembered that worship is not a one-way street; it is not merely what *we* do, what *we* bring to God in our prayers and praise, it is also concerned with what God brings to us, and this comes not only in the reading and through the preaching of His Word, but in those precious times of silence which the untrained find so trying and awkward because they do not know how to use them.

Here the Quakers have much to teach us; and we are often not only afraid to experiment, but even hindered by the dead weight of custom and a rather unintelligent traditionalism.

At the same time, the Quaker method *by itself* involves a great refusal of all the rich heritage of the past, with (a) its

positive discovery and its wealth of devotional experience and expression, and (b) its wholesome check on the possibility of error.

Is it a fair analogy to say that, e.g., in arithmetic, the children of each generation are not left to set out with no multiplication tables, which they must grope for and devise by dint of their own sharp wits ?

B. Most people would probably pass by the question of the value of silence, and would seek to tackle the problem of the rival merits of liturgical and extempore prayer. Our fathers often treated these two methods as mutually exclusive and argued the question on that assumption. Whatever our own practice or preference, we should be ready *in principle* to accept both methods.

As one who prefers the liturgical for a foundation along with some opportunity for the extempore, I offer the following observations.

(1) We are not expected to extemporize hymns, so why *must* we extemporize prayers ? In the early Church at the Eucharist, there was opportunity for both liturgical and "free" prayer, but "free" prayer was before long the privilege of "Prophets" only. To me, it seems to put an almost intolerable burden on the leader of worship—not least on the average lay preacher—if prayer is to be comprehensive, generally helpful to the devotion of all the people, and with the dignity worthy of its high purpose. If all could pray at all times as some can pray sometimes the case would be different ; but I feel strongly that some preparation of prayers is necessary where "free" prayer is the rule, and we have no right to rush into the presence of God without much and deep thought about the words to be used to express the petitions of a congregation.

(The "topical" is as undesirable in prayer as it is in preaching, in both cases it is best used sparingly.)

(2) There is such a thing as perfection of form in prayer as much as in poetry. When we paraphrase poetry we often feel the bathos of it, but within limits it has its use. In the C. of E. Catechism, we have in the "Desire" a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer, but in actual devotion, private or public, there is no doubt as to which words we use. The

perfect expression is something which wears, bears much repetition and is capable of great adaptation to varied circumstances.

(3) Spontaneity and sincerity are not certainties when we pray extempore, and formality is not a certainty when we use a liturgy; this is not the only danger to be feared, and those are not the only virtues to be desired. There is, e.g., a need for restraint in public worship, and for thought for the *general* needs of a congregation which would be less needed in a prayer meeting.

(4) Here again the method used is far less important than the heart of the worshipper.

C. The *place of song* in worship is beyond dispute, but in practice there is often much difficulty. There is to me a clear difference between the type of hymn and music to be used in "Divine Service" and that used in what is purely evangelistic. Perhaps this point may be better expressed, but I hold the distinction to be real; and difficulty can and does arise when people are asked to leave the more elementary type of worship and grow up to the higher.

Also "hearty" singing is sometimes only *lusty*, and if so it is irreverent. "Enjoying ourselves" in our worship is a minor consideration when we offer our praise to God, and though it is applied it is a false standard to apply.

Words and tunes of hymns need much more careful sorting and choice than we are wont to give them. We are told on the authority of Robert Bridges that there are not one hundred best hymns in our language, not even 100 good ones. Without setting our standard quite so high, we can think some hymns not very suitable for a general congregation as being too individual or too subjective for regular use; as an instance I give with real diffidence and regret Dr. Bonar's hymn, "I heard the voice of Jesus say . . ." We should try to keep our hymn-singing free from unreality and insincerity, and such hymns can only be used sparingly. Then there are some popular hymns which are too sentimental to deserve the place which they have got in worship; again with diffidence I give as an instance "Safe in the arms of Jesus," which is (to say no more) hardly virile enough for the needs of the average congregation.

4. I will try to make some practical suggestions as this paper is brought to its close.

(a) We must train our people more definitely in worship ; mere exhortation will not do. We must begin in Sunday School where far too little on this line has been attempted in the past. The opening and closing of School are too often rather perfunctory and should be made periods of real worship. With the general congregation, we can expound the meaning of hymns, which are often sung with little intelligence. Our frequent use of the Lord's Prayer makes us need to be far more careful in its use, and its repetition should be much slower. Similar lines of training will be found as we make the effort.

(b) We must urge the *obligation* of worship, and the need both for keeping in practice and for making progress. Too often people tend to make their worship depend on their inclination " if they feel like it," but our duty to our Father is independent of our changing whims and should be rendered accordingly. It is as natural, as easy and as hard for a man to worship as it is for him to walk ; the power to walk can be lost through disease or weakness but also through refusal to use it. Worship cannot be treated otherwise ; the parallel is clear.

(c) We have to urge that worship is a *joint venture* of the leader and congregation ; it is not something done by another for the edification of a congregation and it can not be deputed. I find the Litany very valuable in this respect, particularly in war time, and I trust it will never be allowed to go back into comparative disuse. Any " pattern " which gives a congregation a definite share, something to do, in worship, is worth consideration.

(d) I find the Christian Year most valuable for the guidance it gives in such things as choice of hymns ; its guidance in choice of lessons where none are prescribed (in the Free Churches) ought to be welcomed. This guidance will help towards balance and fullness of both worship and the presentation of the whole faith. In spite of prejudice against it in some quarters, I feel that neither this nor the Liturgy should be dismissed *merely* because of ecclesiastical prejudice. They are part of the rightful heritage of *all* Christians.

(e) To me, the Collect form in prayer is a fine model and standard ; in extempore prayer, I always want to approximate to it. The unity of thought, the restrained fervour, and the unobtrusive dignity of diction of the Prayer Book Collects are things to aim at ; and we need to remember that we are heard in prayer neither for our much speaking nor for our fine speeches.

(f) We may be compelled by sheer force of circumstances to concentrate far more on the Sacramental services, which the B.B.C. cannot provide. This may or may not go against the grain, but there is the hard fact. Even here, however, there may be great gain, for the two Sacraments of the Gospel are the focus of all which is distinctively Christian in faith and worship. Of the Lord's Supper, Dr. C. H. Dodd writes : " In this Sacrament the whole of what our religion means is expressed. That which otherwise we apprehend piecemeal is integrated in a rite which presents it all as the sheer gift of God " (Christian Worship, p. 82).

(g) We come back at the close to the quotation with which we began. Whatever method we use, " it takes a saint of God to lead the worship of the people." The great preparation for the leader of worship is a life near to God, ' very far ben ' ; and there is hardly less need for a similar preparation on the part of those whose worship he leads.