

The Public Worship of the English Free Churches.

I.

THE English Puritan tradition is popularly supposed to have been dominated by the "charismatic" conception of worship, "praying with the spirit" being its sole hinge, and the "dumb ministry of liturgy" being its chief aversion. But even in the 17th Century this Puritan tradition was not wholly set on extempore prayer. John Robinson, the leader of the Pilgrim Fathers, saw the value of "acknowledged forms of wholesome words". At some of the 'Separatist' gatherings it was customary to use the Scottish Book of Common Order (1560). Many Puritans within the Church of England would have been satisfied with the Prayer Book in a simplified version. Even Laud's persecution did not prevent a pronounced Puritan like Edwards turning to "the five dissenting brethren" at the Westminster Assembly, with the rebuke ;—"Great controversy? 'This great controversy' is raised only by yourselves . . . there being no Reformed Churches that I know of, but do allow the lawful use of set forms of prayer composed and framed by others, and do make use of such sometimes." Through the adoption of the Westminster Directory (1645) Public Worship in England moved out of the Prayer Book harbour towards the uncharted sea, but the mariner was expected to keep the shore line in sight, where buoys and lighthouses marked the course. Had the Westminster Directory been followed, even at a respectful distance, the worship of English Puritanism might have developed along more wholesome lines. The Directory was quite alive to the contemporary danger of seeking Biblical warrant for everything. "There are some circumstances concerning the Worship of God . . . common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the Light of Nature and Christian Prudence."

Even after the Restoration of 1660, the Puritan divines at the Savoy Conference wrote to Charles II. in this strain :—

"We are satisfied in our judgments concerning the lawfulness of a liturgy, or a form of public worship ; provided that it be agreeable to the

Word of God, and fitly suited to the nature of the several ordinances of the Church ; neither too tedious in the whole, nor composed of too short prayers, unmeet repetitions or responsals ; not to be dissonant from the liturgies of other reformed Churches ; nor too rigorously imposed ; nor the minister so confined thereunto, that he may also make use of those gifts for prayer and exhortation which Christ hath given him for the service and edification of the Church."

One is tempted to quote at length from the 'Exceptions' of the twelve Ministers to the Prayer Book, and the twelve Bishops' 'Answer.'⁽¹⁾ There is only space to note that the Bishops were intransigent and the Puritans on the whole reasonable (though the modern Nonconformist might agree with the Bishops in their objection to long prayers, and readily acquiesce in the word 'Sunday' and that most harmless of titles, 'curate.') It is often forgotten that the Puritan divines prepared an amended version of the Book of Common Prayer, which does not depart substantially from that classic volume. The excisions consist of doctrinal emendations here and there, a moderate pruning of versicles, and the omission of meaningless vestiges like the truncated Lord's Prayer after the Creed. Additions consist of the *Shorter Catechism*, an invocation of the Holy Spirit in the Communion Office, and an Order of Divine Service to be used as a substitute for Morning Prayer, especially when the Lord's Supper is celebrated. The revisers modestly stated in their preface :—

"It cannot be thought any disparagement or derogation either to the work itself or to the compilers of it, or to those who have used it, if, after a hundred years since its first composure, such further emendations be made therein, as may be judged necessary for satisfying the scruples of a multitude of sober persons who cannot at all, or very hardly comply with the use of it, as now it is"

In 1864 a fine edition of this *Presbyterian Book of Common Prayer* was edited with notes and introduction by Professor C. W. Shields of Princeton. It is strange that this book has been almost forgotten, while Baxter's *Reformed Liturgy* is remembered. Baxter's work was a composition rather than a compilation, an attempt to win from the King the right to an alternative liturgy, after the dream of a revised Prayer Book was shattered. It is a *tour de force* when one remembers it was hastily prepared in a fortnight. "Nor could he make use of any book, except a Bible and a Concordance, but he compared it all with the Assembly's Directory and the Book of Common Prayer." In spite of

(1) *Vide E. Cardwell's History of Conferences.*

its 17th century scholastic imprint, Baxter's *Reformed Liturgy* is worthy of respect. He wisely introduces an Invocation, realising that the Prayer Book rushes too suddenly into Confession. Thanksgiving is not overlooked and the Intercessions are comprehensive, including the Church Universal, Missions, the State and various occupations. It is left to

"the minister's discretion to abbreviate some parts of worship when he seeth it needful to be longer on some other . . . always taking heed that no mixtures of imprudent, disorderly expressions of private discontent and passion of unreverent, seditious or factious intimations tending to corrupt, and not to edify people's minds, do turn either prayer or preaching into sin".

Baxter found that "the word of a king was a broken reed". Yet the Act of Uniformity (1662) was only passed by 186 votes to 180, "the House of Lords reluctantly assenting", adds Burnet. The expulsion of 2000 Presbyterian and Puritan clergy and the vindictive penal legislation which followed were measures calculated to make the very word 'Liturgy' a symbol of loathing. Yet John Owen in his *Discourses Concerning Liturgies and their Imposition* (1662), and *Concerning the Holy Spirit in Prayer* (1682), is surprisingly temperate in his criticism of "a set and stinted form of words". He admits that liturgical prayer may be more aesthetically satisfying, but holds that charismatic prayer is far more 'searching' and 'edifying'. Bunyan thinks that "the best prayers have more groans than words; and those words that it hath are but a lean and shallow representation of the heart, life and spirit of that prayer". In the next generation, Isaac Watts admitted that "there are some dear to God that can but chatter and cry like a swallow or a crane, as Hezekiah did, yet are in the lively exercise of the grace of prayer". But language that is permissible in private prayer may be "very improper and disagreeable in public". Watts knows of prayers in many dissenting congregations that "have given offence to the pious, been a stumbling-block to the profane", and have, moreover, confirmed Anglicans "in their confinement to liturgies".⁽¹⁾

The heroic age had passed. Charismatic power had spent itself. The Toleration Act put an end to persecution, though disabilities remained. We are in a different spiritual climate when we pass from Owen to Watts on *The Revival*

⁽¹⁾ See Dr N. Micklem's "*Extempore Prayer in the Congregational Tradition*" (*Congregational Quarterly*, July, 1935).

of *Practical Religion among Christians, and particularly the Protestant Dissenters* " (1731). It is now recognised that the Holy Spirit meets human effort half way. As the art of medicine is based on general principles and observation, as the art of preaching needs Reason to explain and apply divine truths, "so the holy skill of prayer is built on a just knowledge of God and ourselves, and can be taught in as rational a method by proper directions and rules" (*A Guide to Prayer*). Conceived or free prayer is distinguished from extempore prayer, with due warning against "an entire dependence on sudden motions and suggestions of thought". He recommends "serious, pious and well-composed patterns of prayer, in order to form our expressions and furnish us with proper praying language . . . Treasure up such expressions especially as you read in Scripture and other books of devotion". He counsels brevity and objectivity:—

"Call upon God, adore, confess,
Petition, plead, and then declare
You are the Lord's. Give thanks and bless,
And let Amen conclude the prayer".

"Watts' Hymns" not merely opened a new era in praise, but marked the surrender of the long settled Puritan prejudice against "human composures".

Another broadening influence was the Methodist movement. Many of the Wesleyans brought with them Anglican traditions; the Prayer Book was used as a matter of course at Wesley's Chapel, City Road. The Puritan tradition was strong among the rank and file of Methodism; as late as 1820 the installation of an organ at Brunswick Chapel, Leeds, led to a minor secession.

On the whole, however, the Methodist movement led to innovations among Congregationalists and others.

By 1800 there was a "debatable land" between Church and Dissent. Quite a number of churches could be found like Surrey Chapel, where the preaching was Methodist, the service Anglican, and the organisation practically Independent. But the influence of the Evangelical Movement on the "Old Dissent" was not altogether for good. Growth in membership was sometimes accompanied by a tendency to over-estimate the value of 'popular' preaching and to under-estimate the value of an educated ministry, which had been ably upheld by the Nonconformist "Academies" under men like Doddridge. The Calvinist strain in Congregationalism, which was at odds with an Anabaptist strain, had now to contend with a popular

Evangelical tendency that was indifferent to questions of sacrament and church order ; not till the days of R. W. Dale and P. T. Forsyth was the true Congregational witness recovered. But in worship, despite the gradual disappearance of the gown and bands, there was distinct improvement about the middle of the 19th century. This was largely due to Dr Binney, of the King's Weigh House, London, who was ready to learn from Anglicans, though a doughty controversialist on the Church and State issue. He was responsible for introducing the anthems and chants that have long been usual in Nonconformist Churches ; his "Eternal Light" is in our Revised Hymnary (No. 36).

Dr Binney's conviction was that while there was a place for extempore prayer in relation to immediate needs and aspirations, the minister should endeavour generally to voice the common worship of his people rather than "reveal his naked soul in whatever condition it happens to be".⁽¹⁾

Towards the end of the 19th century Dr R. W. Dale theoretically 'conceded' the use of familiar suffrages and litanies, as a means of giving congregations "an active and audible part in the service". There was a recognition that one-sided individualism was only 'successful' in the case of exceptional men like Dr Joseph Parker of the City Temple. So strong a Nonconformist as Silvester Horne used and advocated the Collects of the Prayer Book.

II.

It is interesting to notice that the native English Presbyterians who lapsed into Arianism and then Unitarianism in the 18th century, became alive to the 'universal' aspects of the Prayer Book. Their theology drew them further and further from the Church of England, but in worship they were more attracted to forms than orthodox dissenters, and less shackled to 'scriptural precedent'. The 'charismatic' conception of worship made little appeal to their rationalist temperament. These English Presbyterians included many people of culture who were in some respects unwilling dissenters, slow to give up hope that the philosophic temper of 18th century Anglicanism would one day secure their comprehension within the National Church.⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾ Read his imaginary debate among London ministers on Liturgies (Appendix to Eng. ed. of Baird's *Eutaxia*, 1855).

⁽²⁾ Compare Dr Stanton Coit in the 20th C. and his Ethical Society, (*National Idealism and the Book of Common Prayer*, 1908).

Their meeting houses were often architecturally superior, austere but dignified, with pulpit and Communion Table. Practically unspoilt examples may still be seen at Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds, and Norwich. At Warrington, a society of liberal dissenting ministers was formed in 1751 to study questions of worship. A *Rational Liturgy* was drawn up (1763) and the "Octagon Chapel," Liverpool, was specially built for the new cult, which lasted only till 1776.

Dr Theophilus Lindsey founded in 1774 the first avowedly Unitarian Church in London. In Essex Chapel he used his own *Reformed Liturgy*. This was based on Dr Clarke's Arian revision of the Book of Common Prayer which was said to have the approval of George II., and certainly had that of Queen Caroline. Dr Lindsey aimed at gathering a congregation of Anglican sympathisers, so he altered the Liturgy as little as possible, introducing short prayers of his own before and after Sermon. Seven hundred copies were sold in the first six weeks. A fourth edition appeared in 1793, omitting the Apostles' Creed and the three invocations in the Litany. Dr Lindsey felt that he was not ploughing a lonely furrow when news reached him that King's Chapel, Boston, Mass., the headquarters of Tory Anglicanism, had 'gone Unitarian' after the establishment of the United States, and had revised the Prayer Book accordingly.⁽¹⁾

During the 19th century the need was felt for a Service Book, with the Anglican material supplemented by devotions drawn from other sources, ancient and modern. Instead of a credal bond, the bond of worship was preferred "as highest and deepest of all". So in 1862 *Common Prayer for Christian Worship* was published, the joint work of Dr Sadler of Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead, and Dr Martineau.

In 1879 this book was recast by Dr Martineau with the title of *Ten Services*. With remarkable success an avenue of devotion was opened up, midway between conservative revision of ancient material and the absolute minimum of Christian belief and feeling characteristic of the more radical Unitarian congregations. The book rejected the conception of Christ as mediator of prayer.

"It is one thing to make mention in our direct communion with God, of Christ as the unique realisation of that spiritual life of filial surrender to which, in brotherhood with Him, we also aspire. It is quite another, so to hang upon His name as to imply, by its frequency and the functions

(1) See *Memoirs of Theophilus Lindsey*, by T. Belsham (1873 ed.).

attached to it, that without Him we have no divine communion, and with Him only one that is indirect."

Apart from this theological position, the *Ten Services* follow generally the order of the first two (Morning and Evening Prayer revised). There are Scripture Sentences, an address modelled on "Dearly beloved brethren", Versicles, General Confession, and Lord's Prayer, Chants⁽¹⁾ between and after the Lessons, Beatitudes or Affirmation instead of Creed, prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession, with responses.

Later Unitarian manuals follow broadly the lead of *Ten Services*. They include Copeland Bowie's *Seven Services* (1900), Crompton Jones' *Thirty Services* (1878—first part of service alone liturgical), J. M. Connell's⁽²⁾ *Nine Services* (1926), and the most recent and semi-official *Orders of Worship* (Lindsey Press, 1932).

About a hundred Unitarian congregations use regular service books placed in the pews, and about two hundred and fifty blend liturgical and free worship in varying degrees. In spite of the fact that some of these churches have ceased to celebrate Communion, or observe it half-heartedly, the chancel and Gothic Revival architecture have been popular since about 1850. Even the surplice is not unknown. Anglican practices have survived through the conversion to Unitarianism of clergy like Stopford Brooke. In other chapels a simple service is found. Many a quaint old late 17th or early 18th century meeting-house may still be seen in quiet country towns, such as Knutsford, Cheshire—a chapel associated with Mrs Gaskell.

Unitarian congregations are small, even in the cities. The Octagon Chapel, Norwich, which had two pastors in 1800 ministering to an intellectual and artistic *élite*, has now an attendance of about seventy members at the forenoon service. Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, a huge building, crowded in the Victorian period, is sparsely attended to-day. Throughout England, stationary and dwindling congregations testify to the fact that no Church can live by reason, culture and progress alone, nor even by a spirit of devout worship and aesthetic symbolism, valuable as these are.

(1) Sometimes new, but in Scriptural language.

(2) See his pamphlet reprinted from the *Hibbert Journal*—*The Continuity of Divine Inspiration: a plea for an extended Lectionary* (Lindsey Press, 1928). Also, his *Devotional Readings from the Literature of Christendom* (2nd ed., Longmans, Green, 1927). This is intended as suggestive material for Church use.

III.

Among the orthodox (or rather Liberal Evangelical) Free Churches the work of Dr John Hunter was epoch-making. His *Devotional Services* started as a brochure of 28 pp. in 1882, and expanded with his growing experience in Glasgow and London till it reached a tenth edition in 1920 and became a devotional classic, widely known beyond Congregationalism and beyond Great Britain. It is hardly necessary to describe a book so familiar to Scottish ministers.

Since the Great War there has been a steady flow of service books from individuals, groups and committees. While nothing has appeared to rival the work of Dr Hunter, the new age has needs of its own—brevity, for example—which have to be met. And there is a new call for straightforwardness and simplicity, as contrasted with the Victorian love of the ornate and the rhetorical. Among recent books *Come, let us Worship* (Kingsgate Press, 1930) has been undeservedly overlooked. It is the fruit of many years' experience at Hamstead Road Baptist Church, Birmingham; compiled by the late Rev. H. Bonner, it was revised by the Rev. F. C. Spurr. A more unusual manual, the result of careful experiment, is *The Rodborough Bede Book*, prepared and privately printed by the Rev. C. E. Watson of Rodborough, near Stroud, Gloucestershire.

"No apology is offered for re-introducing the old English word BEDE. In Saxon days it stood not only for a *prayer* but also for a short *form of service*. . . A Bede Book is to be regarded rather as a volume of 'offices'."

Some of the post-war books are fond of adapting the Litany form. Of these, we may mention G. H. Russell's *Intercession Services*—twenty-five responsive acts of worship that may be incorporated in an ordinary service (Allenson, 1923). D. Tait Patterson's *Call to Worship*, with music arranged by Dr Dyson of Winchester College (Carey Press) is weak in some respects, but strong in a collection of thirty litanies, some of them modern, others compiled from the Scriptures. In contrast to these manuals designed to supplement the ordinary Nonconformist service is Dr Orchard's *Divine Service* (1921), definitely "Catholic" in tendency but sound in workmanship and free from amateurishness.

The views of the Free Catholic Movement which Dr Orchard led before his exodus to the Church of Rome are largely expressed in *A Free Church Book of Common*

Prayer (Dent, 1929). There is a lofty universal note in its ten orders of worship. The sacramental section, however, is almost Anglo-Catholic in tone. This book has had a good circulation, helped no doubt by its excellent binding and low price (3/6). But its tacit rejection by the Free Churches was as definite as Parliament's official rejection of the amended Prayer Book in the same year.

The slim *Book of Congregational Worship* (1921) officially approved by the Congregational Union of England and Wales, was naturally untainted with such doctrines as the *Free Church Book of Common Prayer*. The Preface modestly claimed that it was designed "to deliver a congregation from the tyranny of the pulpit and to deliver the minister from the tremendous drain on his spiritual resources." Its value is distinctly positive. There is a well-balanced collection of prayers for special occasions. And the Communion Service reflects the deeper interpretation of the Lord's Supper that gained ground through such books as P. T. Forsyth's *The Church and the Sacraments* (1917). Brilioth is very interested in "the manner in which the classical forms of the eucharistic liturgy are seen returning to their own, even in a church where hitherto formlessness has been the only law" (*Eucharistic Faith and Practice*).

There is hope of improvement in the serious study of Liturgics suggested by *Christian Worship: Studies in its History and Meaning* (Oxford, 1936, 12/6). This symposium by alumni of Mansfield College, Oxford, edited by Principal Nathaniel Micklem, starts with "The Old Testament Background", but it ends with a searching discussion of modern preaching, prayer, praise and sacraments, in the perspective of the historic approach. E. R. Micklem in *Our Approach to God* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1934) deals trenchantly with the problems that confront the Free Churches to-day. He has little patience with attempts to brighten worship with 'holy furniture' or fussy, amateurish ceremonialism; no 'introits', responses or 'vespers' will in themselves redeem a service from being a mere inorganic programme.

He is concerned with common worship as a living transaction with a living God. But "an artificial element" is necessary in any cult. "The Architecture of a Service" is inevitable and should therefore be as harmonious as possible.

Dr J. E. Rattenbury in his *Vital Elements of Public Worship* (Epworth Press, 1936) surveys the field of Method-

ism with some discouragement. He finds that the congregations which still use Anglican Morning Prayer (about a hundred) are not being reinforced ; other congregations are tending to drop the canticles and psalms ; kneeling is not as common as it was. The regular use of a Children's Address at the morning service has led to the sacrifice of the Second Lesson and "has emphasised what in Methodism needed no emphasis, the pulpit".

A new manual, *Divine Service, approved by the Methodist Conference for optional use* (Epworth Press, 1/-), provides ten orders of service for general use, with special orders for festivals, and some very suggestive responsive Acts of Worship.

The Methodist Church still retains (slightly amended) Anglican forms for the sacraments and other ordinances—to which the former Wesleyans are particularly attached. Dr Rattenbury says that while the 1662 Communion Service rightly maintains the main traditions of the ancient Church, it is "essentially a Protestant Liturgy—every trace of mediaeval childishness has been expunged from it". A shortened form is being prepared, as an alternative, for those congregations which find the existing service tedious.

The non-Methodist may learn from Dr Rattenbury much about sacramental observances in his Church ; for example, the fact that the Evening Communions now so characteristic of Methodism were not adopted because the Last Supper was held at night. The practice originated in the qualified permission granted by Conference in 1795 for the celebration of Communion in Wesleyan chapels provided it was held at a different hour from the services of the parish church ; 'there must be no rival altar'. Evening Communion is now a recognised practice among Evangelical Anglicans ; but it was introduced as late as 1851.

It was Wesley's early and weekly Communions that heralded the Oxford Movement in its eucharistic aspect. "A Methodist Sacramental Fellowship" has recently been formed to correct subjectivity and individualism by making Communion more central, standing firmly for Christian doctrine as expressed in Scripture and the Creeds, and as vivified in Wesley's hymns. Without any intention of making Methodism ritualistic or sacerdotal, this Fellowship seeks to return to the spirit of its Founder.

Writing of the Future of English Nonconformity, that discerning critic of our age, "Ilico" of *The British Weekly*,

thinks that the most common reason for Free Churchmen joining the Church of England is neither social snobbery nor the lure of Episcopacy, still less Anglican preaching, but definite preference for a more reverent form of worship.

It would appear to the outside observer that there is ample need for an enlightened Free Church witness south of the Border. Without copying some of the ex-Wesleyans' attempt to provide an exact equivalent to Morning Prayer, the Nonconformist appeal will have to be broader than simply to satisfy one type of religious experience with a purely extempore tradition. Perhaps St Martin's-in-the-fields provides the nearest approximation at present to a type of service that blends liturgy and popular appeal. But few Anglicans would claim that St Martin's is representative of contemporary Anglicanism. In the Free Churches there is a great opportunity for a synthesis of reverence with full freedom and fellowship. We of the Church of Scotland watch these experiments with interest and sympathy.

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