

Second Thoughts on the Book of Common Order

The Presidential Address to the Church Service Society at its Annual Meeting, at New College, Edinburgh, 21st May, 1948.

It is now eight years since the *Book of Common Order* appeared: it has been widely circulated, widely used, and perhaps the time has come for some attempt at an appraisal of its value. This Society must of course take a peculiar interest in it and in its fortunes.

Let me refresh your minds as to the service-books of the Scottish Church. The pre-Reformation books can have been very little known to the great mass of the people. Few in any case could read, and to a large extent what was done in church was regarded as the priests' concern. The English *Book of Common Prayer* may have been used to a very limited extent for a few years before and after the Reformation, but it obtained no real currency. The use of Geneva came quickly in, and the year 1564 saw the first of a very large number of editions of John Knox's *Book of Common Order*, the last of which appeared in 1644, just before the coming of the *Westminster Directory* which is still our only strictly official standard. Knox's book must have been widely known and must have established itself in some way in the affections of the people. It is not a book on which we can look back with much pride. It is violent and unseemly in much of its language: there is little of the grace of Christian devotion about it: its Eucharistic office is meagre. But it was an official manual of worship and it did establish some sort of standard. It is strange how completely it became forgotten and how few copies of its many editions have survived. *The Westminster Directory* was in one sense hardly a service-book at all. It gave directions, excellent directions in many respects, and suggested subjects for prayer. (The ill-fated book of 1637 had no influence on our worship, other than a negative one, until recent years.) Although the *Directory* remained our official manual it gradually sank into virtual oblivion, and by the nineteenth century I do not suppose that very many ministers knew anything about it. As regards real service-books, there is a gap between 1644, the year of the last

edition of Knox's book, and 1867, the year of the first edition of *Euchologion*, and two centuries is a long time. I do not need to remind you that *Euchologion*, in all its editions, was a publication of this Society and in no sense an official book. There could have been no official book at that period. But its influence was far-reaching and profound. In most ways, though not in all, it was a beneficial influence, for *Euchologion* was, and is, a remarkably good book. Compare it with Knox's incoherent and incomplete volume and you must be amazed at the difference. Much of *Euchologion*, much more than its actual language, though indeed much of that, has survived, and has left what has every appearance of being a lasting impress on our worship. There is nothing amateurish about it. Its very outward form was competent and appealing. It was dignified and beautiful, and in the main its orders adhered to authentically correct precedent. Those of us especially who are old enough to have rejoiced in our first acquaintance with it, and to have used it or heard it used, will always regard it with affection and indeed with something of reverence.

It was, however, the product of its time in a sense which cannot apply to such a book as the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. It represented no evolution. There had been almost no thought given to the outward forms of worship for two centuries in Scotland. It was also of necessity coloured overmuch by the influence of Anglican custom of the time. It drew very largely on Catholic and on Reformation sources, but for all that it was a product of the mid-nineteenth century. By the end of that century it had begun to date. It was undoubtedly verbose. The ordinary services were much too long: each section of them was too long, and the language came increasingly to be felt as over-elaborate and indeed unreal. I think that applies particularly to its confessions. But in many places it had a colour, a grace and a sparkle, not all of which has been retained in later books. I think it is by far the greatest contribution which this Society has made to our Scottish worship.

I do not know who was the prime mover in seeking to supplement or to supplant it by a book which would have a certain authority from the General Assembly. That Court had already sanctioned the publication of *Prayers for Family and Social Worship*, and, when a new edition of that book was required, the Committee on Aids to Devotion, with a certain courage, resolved to include in the book

services for use in ordinary public worship, and indeed for all the acts of the Christian ministry. The result was the appearance in 1923 of *Prayers for Divine Service*. That book also continues to command the affections of many of us, both in its first and second editions. The services are shorter than those of *Euchologion*; the language is much more terse. The service of Holy Communion is particularly good. In its two editions *Prayers for Divine Service* has had a wide circulation, and has exercised a very considerable influence. But, of course, the Church was as yet not re-united. The United Free Church Assembly, not without some opposition or at least hesitation, authorised, just before the Union, its own *Book of Common Order*, the book of 1928. That book had a considerable sale and exercised a good influence. It differed considerably from *Euchologion* and *Prayers for Divine Service*. It contained only two orders for Morning and Evening Service and its language was perhaps less traditional and more diffuse. But, like *Prayers for Divine Service*, it had the express authorization of the General Assembly for use as a guide to ministers in all the offices of the Church; and so it came about that the Union of 1929 found the Church in possession of two authorized manuals of worship.

It was soon felt that the reunited Church ought to have a book of its own, and a year or two after Union the Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion began the preparation of the new *Book of Common Order* of 1940. As I try to consider that book after these eight years, one thing strikes me more and more forcibly: Here, really for the first time since the middle of the seventeenth century, the Church of Scotland has a service-book generally recognized as possessing authority; not of course in the sense of laying down invariable forms, but as shewing forth the sort of services the Church approves. Its two immediate predecessors were authorized by the two different parts of a divided Church, and neither of them ever became so well known or so much really used or consulted or looked up to as the Book of 1940 has become. And that is much the most important of my second thoughts on the book. We cannot over-emphasize its importance. For the first time since 1644, in a very real sense since the Reformation, the Church of Scotland possesses a service-book of her own, increasingly recognized, increasingly used, increasingly known throughout the world as the book which sets forth the Church of Scotland's view as to how the services of the

sanctuary ought to be conducted. The circulation figures of the book are already impressive. Further, the book is known and respected throughout the English-speaking world. The great Presbyterian Church of America has done us the compliment of copying it, down to its external format, type and cover and general lay-out. It has won the affection of Service Chaplains of the Church of England and the English Free Churches. Here, I submit, is an achievement, under the good hand of God, which ought to cause our hearts to sing. Fifty years ago it would have seemed impossible. The conclusion I myself draw from it is that we should for some time, for a long time, leave well alone and give no countenance to any premature proposals for revision. The book is far from perfect. It had to be to some little extent a compromise between two of its predecessors: it will date a little. But let us allow it to make its way even more than it has yet done: give the mind of the Church time to settle down to it and consider it fully. If the need for additional material or for some changes appears to become pressing, let this Society provide them, as it can do so much more easily than an official committee. Personally I do not adhere meticulously to the book, but more and more I thank God for it. I like to hear it in other churches. Sometimes when I have fancied that a good deal in it could be amended I try to look it through again as a whole and I generally find myself amazed at its competence and its sufficiency.

And as I have said that is my biggest and most important second thought. But, of course, criticisms do arise in one's mind and I venture to express some of them as the sort of thing this Society ought to take interest in considering. To begin at the beginning I should like more variety in the Vestry and Choir Prayers—just the sort of thing which this Society might provide in a cheap leaflet. For the ordinary Sunday services I still prefer some of those in *Prayers for Divine Service* and bits of some of those in *Euchologion*; but generally, and supplemented by *Prayers for the Christian Year*, I find them satisfactory, and an excellent guide. I am not so fond of the Evening orders, but tastes differ. I find their language a little unreal, especially in some of the confessions. “The drift of earthly thought has come between our souls and Thee. We have walked in shadows”—beautiful in its way, appropriate in certain circumstances for private devotion, but hardly the voice of the Church. Or, from the same service: “There

is no commandment of Thy word which we have not transgressed in spirit or in act ". True, doubtless, but is it right to place such words on the lips of congregations who just do not realize their truth? But I would not labour such criticisms. More important is the feeling that our ordinary Sunday prayers still lack definiteness. There is a most interesting article in the current issue of *Life and Work* on certain problems brought to the Editor's notice by individuals and Guilds and Youth Clubs—on the sort of thing we have all been thinking about ever since we began to think, but the sort of thing which has not so readily found its way into the columns of the Church's magazine. Half of his correspondents claim that the Church's worship means almost nothing to them, principally because they find it difficult or impossible to follow the minister's prayers. Well, it seems to me that the complete answer to that is, first, direction as to what the prayers are about, and second, economy in words. The book does suggest direction in some services, but I should like to see a rubric suggesting its general use. What a difference in reality is made simply, for instance, by the words: "Let us confess our sins to Almighty God ". And some of the services could still bear pruning. What has become known as the "problem" of the Evening Service is, one judges, in the minds of many in Edinburgh; it ought to be in the minds of us all. No one here will desire radical change, or the substitution of anything whatever for *worship*, but that is not to exclude variety, a greater variety than any of our books has yet suggested.

I am not altogether satisfied, after very constant use, with the offices for Holy Baptism and Marriage, but the more I consider them the more difficult do I find it to arrive at satisfactory amendment.

It will, I think, be generally conceded that the main Order for Holy Communion is the crown and pride of the book. It has won the highest praise in some unlooked for quarters and I think it commends itself more and more to ourselves. I am not altogether happy about the placing of the Prayer of the Veil and the Oblation of the Elements. The former I sometimes place immediately after the sermon; for the latter I find it difficult to select a satisfactory place at all. I make a few additions, a few verbal changes. But in this Order I feel that we possess a Communion Office which can bear comparison with any in Christendom. It has indeed been spoken of by some Anglican critics as

probably the best in the English language. That being so, it doubtless seems a pity that the minds of men should be confused and distracted by no fewer than *four* other alternative rites. There was reason, indeed necessity, for some alternative, and on the whole I have little fault to find with the Order specifically entitled "alternative". The very short Order is also invaluable for private celebrations. But I begin to regret that space was wasted by the insertion of the so-called "Shorter Order", which is indeed not considerably shorter at all and is just a rather poor variant of the first. What I personally feel would be of use is some brief direction for the guidance of those ministers who have introduced, or are thinking of introducing, a frequent celebration at the close of Morning Service. I know there are objections to that type of celebration: they seem to me both correct and, in our present circumstances, pedantic. I think that along those lines lies our only hope of gradually familiarizing the people with a more frequent celebration, without sudden and rude disturbance of centuries-old habit. The so-called "Short Order" claims that it may be used after an ordinary service, but it is not really adequate for regular use in church. My own practice at my monthly celebrations is to regard the preceding Morning Service as fulfilling the pro-anaphoral portion of the Communion—which I am convinced it does. At the Communion proper I start with the warrant and thereafter continue with the full Order. Fifteen or at most twenty minutes is all that is required for the whole service; but the people have assisted at the full rite in its integrity, instead of at an abbreviated service really designed for the sick-room.

There is not much that I would change in the occasional offices in the book or in the prayers for occasional use. The more I get to know them in use the more I value them; but one final section calls, I think, for really radical amendment, I would say for immediate amendment, either by the Church or by this Society. I refer to the Lectionary; and I think I shall have the assent of its surviving compiler. The Lectionary is, of course, an able piece of work, and it broke new ground in being chosen throughout with reference to the ecclesiastical year. But it was compiled by two people in comparative haste, and I think it the one portion of the book which has not really stood up to use. The making of a satisfactory Lectionary is a big and difficult task. The Church of England, not content with its fairly recent Revision, has embarked on a series of experimental

lectionaries. Several have been published, and I cannot just see any of them commanding wide approval. The Scottish Episcopal three-year course is perhaps the best available at the moment. But all these lectionaries, including our own, suffer from what seems to me the quite radical defect of treating Morning and Evening courses as parts of the same course. One wonders if this is on the naive assumption that every parish has regular Morning and Evening Services attended by the same individuals ! Its practical effect is very largely to neutralize the value of the course of readings. A really good lectionary will not be easily come by and will involve a good deal of experiment. I think that there should be separate series of readings for Morning and Evening. The Evening course might conceivably be arranged with advantage on the anthology principle, rather than with any design of providing a continuous course of narrative or argument ; or, alternatively, the Morning and Evening courses could at suitable intervals be interchanged. Another problem not yet fully solved is what we are to do with the traditional liturgical Gospel and Epistle. The Church of England has been experimenting also with short introductions to the lessons, giving the people in very few words some idea of their context, and this is a matter deserving full consideration.

These, then, are my second thoughts, which will certainly provoke some disagreement, although I think there will be general agreement that in the *Book of Common Order* we have a good book. We in Scotland are still in the experimental stage of arriving at a completely satisfactory vehicle of public devotion. We are very largely in the position of the primitive Church, and some words of Dom Gregory Dix seem to me to describe not inaptly our own circumstances. Speaking of the primitive Church, he writes : " Within a customary outline the celebrant-Bishop was to a considerable extent free to phrase the prayer as seemed to him best. Thus the local tradition of the prayer in any church could grow from many sources—from the prayers and meditations and happy (or less happy) inspirations of subsequent bishops ; from the devout study by them of the Scriptures, or by deliberate borrowings from other churches far or near ". I think that the biggest service we can give at present to the Church's worship is in encouraging a more active interest and a more active part by the congregation. The services in the book need to be vitalized. It may be by direction, it may be by response ; but surely we in this

Society have some contribution to give towards making it easier for the people to realize that this is their affair. You remember in Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* how Marius makes his first acquaintance with Christian worship. He finds himself in the Catacombs one morning and suddenly comes on a company of Christians engaged in what is to him a strange ritual. What makes the keenest impression on him is the visible effect that ritual is having on the company. "Those young men, bent down so discreetly on the details of the sacred service, had faced life and were glad". There are children there, stretching forth their hands, chanting in a resonant voice and with boldly upturned faces: *Christe eleison*! And then the wonderful rite proceeds, always with bursts of antiphonal singing, developing at one point into a kind of dialogue between the chief minister and the whole assembly: *Sursum corda! habemus ad dominum*! It is all strange to the thoughtful pagan, but what comes to him so tremendously is the sense of reality about it all. Some "credible message from beyond the flaming ramparts of the world is moulding anew their very bodies and looks and voices." The early Church had so developed its service that it was really the service of *everyone* who assisted at it: it was no affair of the chief minister: it was the affair of all and seemed to stamp itself on the outward appearance of all. Contrast that with our average service to-day, even our average "good" service! Our real aim, an aim in which this Society has a large part, is not to make our services more aesthetically pleasing, or more like or more unlike those of other parts of the Church, but rather to make them peoples' services, acts which from start to finish will hold the imagination of all who take part in them; so that a stranger entering one of our churches might find, as did Marius when he entered the Roman catacomb, that here is indeed some message from beyond the flaming ramparts of the world, moulding anew men's very bodies and looks and voices.

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