

## The Past Hundred Years—End or Beginning ?

*The case for review of our Common Worship.*

DR W. R. Matthews, Dean of St Paul's, in a sermon preached in the Cathedral during the War, recounted the following amusing contretemps : " I remember that a very eminent organist at a Cathedral where I was Dean once stopped the full choir in the middle of a rehearsal and, to the mingled scandal and delight of the choristers, addressed the dignified Succentor"—that is, the Precentor's deputy, and virtual director of the musical service—" in these words : ' Mr Succentor, do you ever stop and ask yourself what the devil we are supposed to be doing here ? ' " It is, as the Dean noted, a very pertinent enquiry.

The aim of the present article is not to answer the question, what we are supposed to be doing in Church at worship ; but to ask whether it is not time we raised it. Let us look at some of the arguments for more wide-spread, more radical, and, it may even be, official study in the field of the Church's common worship.

### *1. The implications of recent researches regarding baptism.*

The experience of the General Assembly's Special Commission on Baptism, discovering, as it unquestionably did, a somewhat impoverished comprehension of one part of the Church's sacramental life, inevitably raises a question about the Church's worship as a whole. In retrospect certain things stand out.

First is the significant fact that when the Commission was appointed, its necessity was widely questioned. And secondly, when the preliminary reports began to appear, these were at first misconstrued and the Biblical groundwork somewhat undervalued. It is now possible, however, to look back and acknowledge that the exhaustive research, instituted by the Commission and later carried into the courts of the Church, has in fact resulted in a refreshed understanding of the significance of the Sacrament. Baptism today holds the place of importance in the *mind* of the Church (fortunately it had never lost that place in the Church's practice) which it ought never to have lost. No longer can it be

regarded as merely symbolic or devotionally helpful. Once again it rings true sacramentally, as an action of God.

It is this instructive experience which makes it possible to ask now with some hope of being understood: Was Baptism the only place in the economy of worship that required a fresh survey, and, possibly, authoritative recommendation on the part of the Church? Have the conclusions regarding Baptism made it possible for us to acknowledge the following to be at least possibilities: (a) that much of our regular "common prayer" suffers, as Baptism did, from a comparable *malaise* of psychological rather than theological understanding and construction; and (b) that it is this, among other factors, that has given rise, not only to the dislocation of the classical articulations and the debilitation of the forms of common prayer, but also to a difficulty in ecumenical understanding. It is obvious that the experience of the Special Commission provokes further questions.

## 2. *The fact of popular misconception regarding worship.*

At the Annual General Meeting of the Church Service Society in 1878, Sir James Fergusson of Kilkerran, Bart., summed up the situation as it then was by saying that those who understood the people of Scotland knew the Society had great difficulties to face, for it had a mass of prejudice to contend with which it might take generations to overcome.

When it is remembered that the speaker had grown up in a Church—the Church of Scotland—in which ~~not even the lessons from Holy Scripture had been read at worship for over two hundred years (the restoration of their reading had been officially enjoined only in 1856)~~, it will be agreed that his words constituted something of an understatement. Flagrant malpractices, hallowed by no more than fifty years of custom, let alone two hundred, come to be accorded the status of sovereign principles. To undo them is a sinister "innovation".

There had been a time, even in Scotland, when the word "innovation" meant something quite different. In 1642 the General Assembly sent down a letter to Presbyteries warning them against "innovations": but these were, not the saying but the *omission* of, the Lord's Prayer, the Doxology as conclusion to the Psalm, and the Minister's kneeling for private devotion when he entered the pulpit. To this day acts of corporate worship which have come down to us, hallowed by the breath of the earliest centuries of Christian devotion—the *Salutation* and the *Lift up your*

*hearts* in the Holy Communion, for example—are regarded as Anglican or Roman Catholic (*sic*) and *therefore*, for reasons doubly and grotesquely wrong, are suspect!

It would seem to be time our Scottish folk were better informed in order that they might recover their sense of proportion. It would seem to be time they attuned an ear to things august and worthy of this high worship of God. It would seem to be time we ceased our small struttings in the name of Reformers who, were they here, would very speedily repudiate many of the notions we presume to attach to their name, and by which we have made their repute ridiculous. It would seem to be time we learned to be Christians—Christians not of some deformed mental image of the Church, but Christians of the fontal Reformation and, yet earlier, of the first, fresh, corporate, theologically rich, and evangelically grounded worship of the Church.

It is, however, not the people who are to blame. Ignorance provides no ingredients for judgment; and of the story and inner meanings of their worship our people are largely uninstructed. The portions of Scottish religious history that alone lingered securely in the imaginations of their immediate forebears were tales of the epic wars of freedom. The Arbroath Declaration, the seventeenth century covenants, the Disruption—there, our fathers were encouraged to think, were the characteristic moments of God in His dealings with His people.

All honour to them for declining to swallow a form of prayer because it was being rammed down their throats. Yet it must be admitted that if you refuse a thing, not because you will not have it, but because you will not have it thrust upon you, this inevitably leaves behind it a heavy sediment of suspicion regarding the thing itself. This is and will continue to be the attitude of our Scottish folk until their suspicions are eased by better information. They remain suspicious of all arguments deriving from alien Communion. They will not be reassured by what they suspect to be party utterances even within the Church. Perhaps they will believe no one but the General Assembly.

Yet from better information much good must flow. It is nearly impossible for any society to develop its own tradition with confidence if it knows no other. Presumably this is why one still finds this ignorance of liturgical knowledge (and even contempt) carried by a student through all his years of theological training into the ministry itself, remaining in many instances uncorrected to the end.

The writer is not alone in having had the experience of a Holy Communion in a Scottish kirk, in the course of which an Old Testament lesson was read, but no Gospel ; during which there was heard not one of the traditional forms of that part of the eucharistic rite which is common to all Christendom (wherever anything like catholicity has been preserved) ; no consecration of the elements, indeed, no Communion Prayer at all ! ~~The very action of the Sacrament had become curiously dislocated, as if the bread and wine were distant relations, each enjoying a separate sacramental life.~~

Let it be said, gratefully, that all this was deeply sincere—a “private liturgy” obviously carefully prepared, if in a grievously personal idiom. Needless to say, it was also intensely moralistic and individualistic, implying—in a manner still familiar in our public prayers—that the assurance of God’s Presence is somehow warranted by the personal feeling of the individual worshipper. Prayer of this order is, however, neither churchly nor sacramental ; nor indeed is it properly Scriptural. God’s Presence is not attested by human emotions, which at best are unreliable guides, but by His own promise.

The foregoing experience (certainly not an isolated one) is not wholly surprising when it is remembered how scant is the guidance the Church has officially provided for her ministers and people during the centuries since her present standards were agreed.

### 3. *A blank page in the history of the Scottish Church.*

It has never been seriously pretended that the ~~reluctant compromise with Southern Puritanism represented by the Directory~~ reflected the best, or even the bulk, of Scottish opinion even in 1643. Still less can they conceivably be held to present a liturgical *vade mecum* for the second half of the twentieth century. Yet consider the extent of the direction which the Church has offered her freshly-fledged ministers and her people during three hundred years of her history.

The period following the Westminster Assembly saw the publication of the Metrical Psalter (1650) without tunes, the strengthening of Puritan dislike even of such forms of worship as the Lord’s Prayer, and the endless dislocations incidental to the “troubled time”. The resultant starkness in the structures of worship, and indeed the actual dearth of ordinances, were such as can be matched, so far as we know in no other country or age in the whole story of the Church, except during periods of barbarian invasion.

In 1694 the General Assembly itself drove the final nail in the coffin of the Scripture lesson by further encouraging the already obtrusive "lecture". In 1746 the General Assembly did indeed recommend that the Psalm be sung "without reading the line"; but relatively petty reforms of this kind were in any case observed only in the breach.

It is a nearly unbelievable fact, that one or two items of such a nature seem to represent the sum-total of the Assembly's positive concern about worship between the publication of the Directory in 1643 and the day in 1856 when at length they took measures to restore the reading of the Scriptures to the Sunday forenoon service. By then the wholesome breath of more enlightened counsels was beginning to be encountered in the debates of the Assembly.

In the light of all this, 1859 must strike one as a year of high destiny. The Assembly appointed its first Committee on Aids to Devotion. The fact that six years later the Church Service Society was constituted, by a small but able *cadre* of liturgically minded ministers and elders, points to a conviction that had been growing for some years, that the time was more than ripe for the Church to give sustained, scholarly, and devout thought to what, after all, is her central office in history, her *leitourgia*.

This extraordinary story of prodigal neglect and belated repentance is a reminder, if such is required, that the century now immediately behind us has been necessarily experimental and therefore now requires to be assessed.

#### 4. *The experimental century.*

Clearly the early liturgical reformers, Story, Lee and the rest, could only go part of the way, even if they could have seen the final destination; and it is clear they did not.

The Calvinian Church offered no precedents that were valid for the later century. It had been said, and rightly, by a French Evangelical churchman, Jean Frederick Osterwald of Neuchatel, as early as 1701: "Our adversaries are right when they say that Calvin introduced a form of worship entirely unknown to antiquity." (Quoted by Revd. J. M. Bates, M.A., at the Annual Meeting of the Church Service Society of New Zealand, 1959). Unfortunately the promise of that richer order of worship of which, in Scotland, Knox's emotional catholicity had already laid at least the foundations, however economically, was not to be fulfilled. When the smoke of the succeeding century had died down, the insights of the reformers were confused

in the memory and offered an uncertain light. The pioneers of the Church Service Society could find few precedents that meant anything to the Scottish people ; no point of living contact any longer existed between traditional forms and the man in the pew. It was this, quite as much as the lingering prejudice that smouldered deep in the Scottish mind like a half-remembered folk-myth, that constituted the problem.

The only answer was an experimental one, as comparison of the successive editions of *Euchologion* show. People learn to walk by walking. This the pioneers proceeded to do, hoping to take with them a few congregations, or a few people in each congregation. In the so obviously different climate of 1962, it is not easy to realise how very recent is the Scottish recovery of anything that can deserve to be called public worship. It is not surprising if many questions still await an answer.

#### 4. *The Book of Common Order* (1940).

It is true that the *Book of Common Order* (1940)—itself the result of a fairly recent process of acclimatization on the part of the Church as a whole—represents a step of the utmost significance. Unfortunately it was published without a commentary. The commentary required would have been simple in style, scholarly yet readable, and above all providing materials for teaching, so as to make of the Form for Holy Communion a living rite, loved and practised by ordinary people, teaching them what corporate worship means. This desired end is not yet. We have a silent people. Some insights of the Reformation still await their fulfilment.

#### 5. *Unfulfilled insights of the Reformation.*

We are twentieth century men. We cannot put the clock back and worship in the sixteenth century way. Nevertheless it is an insight derived from the Reformation that, in one form or another, is being developed in the world-wide liturgical movement of today. The recovery of worship as an action, shared by the whole Body, the entire *laos*, was a reformation aim. Another was that the action, whether sacramental or not, was to be theologically understood and so expressed. Here was no psychologically contrived order, designed, so to speak, "to make friends and influence people", like some "orders of service" today. Such was not the business of the Church. Also, in practice the method fails in the end, presumably because it lacks the

note of divine and churchly authority. It may be that it is this that is felt to be lacking in certain of the services in the *Book of Common Order*. The direction is largely Godward. The authoritative manward direction is insufficiently clear; and clear it ought to be in Christian worship.

Ponder some sentences from the Communion prayer of 1564: "O Lord, the blind dulness of our corrupt nature will not suffer us sufficiently to weigh those Thy most ample benefits; yet, nevertheless, at the commandment of Jesus Christ our Lord, we present ourselves to this, His Table, which He hath left . . . . to declare and witness that by Him alone we have received liberty and life, that by Him alone Thou dost acknowledge us Thy children and heirs . . . . etc."

By Him alone! Here again is the authentic tongue and faith of the *Scots Confession* of four years earlier. It enshrines much of the theology of Christian worship. It is "by Him alone", "in His Name", "through Jesus Christ our Lord" that worship is offered at all.

The Confession of sin is not something we do in church, but something Christ does in us. He who once stood in the fulness of His manhood and the full reach of His divinity beside sinners on the banks of Jordan, confessing for them what they could not well know how to confess for themselves, stands still in the midst of His Church as High Priest, yet as Man, identified with His Church and making possible her confession. "Through Him alone!"

The absolution, the power to bind and loose—and as to this, how explicit is the Prayer and Form of Absolution in the *Book of Common Order*, 1564—rests not on some supposed benignity of God, but solidly on Christ's reconciling work. "Through Him alone!"

Nor is the thanksgiving, as it appears to be in so many of the private "floating liturgies" of today, merely a moral discipline of "counting one's blessings", concluding with a thanksgiving for Jesus Christ, God's greatest gift. Rather, it is of the same pattern as the eucharistic prayer, an *anamnesis* in the Bible's plenary meaning of that word; certainly not a mere recollection but a realisation, not a calling to mind but almost a calling-into-action, a coming with power through closed doors of the Lord Himself, to effect again through the modes of worship what once He effected in a different mode when He took our flesh upon Him, lived, was crucified, risen and ascended. All "ordinary" natural gifts, for which we give thanks, are in a sense

uncovenanted except in Him. They become gifts of the Kingdom "through Him alone."

A Church whose worship lacks, throughout its action, this note of Christ's immediately exercised authority, this churchly dimension, has nothing of eternal significance to say to men—nothing to say at all except by way of passing encouragement "to help them through the week" (how significant our modern phrase!) in the fulfilment of some programme or other that they have proposed for themselves.

In some degree then—to what extent it is difficult to say—the psychologically-slanted worship which obtains today in many churches seems to require theological estimation and reconstruction. What this implies for forms and orders of common prayer it is not the purpose of this article to attempt to indicate. One fact, however, does seem clear. The experimental century is over. On every side the question regarding worship raises itself. It cannot indefinitely be postponed.

#### 6. *Contemporary urgencies.*

Significantly, it is this recovery of the dimension of theological depth that is also characteristic of that liturgical movement of our time which, though differently in different countries and Communion, is proving to be a genuine mode of religious revival in our day. But this revival ought to be trans-denominational. Since no one can properly understand his own traditions unless he has some understanding of traditions other than his own, any Church must grow merely defensive and ultimately anaemic if it is not continually refreshed by insights learned and taken over from others; and all this not grudgingly but boldly and with rich appreciation. This implies that one of our studies ought to be that of the diverse traditions and means of grace by which God has enriched our sister branches of the Church throughout the years.

#### *A practical question.*

What action can now be taken by a Church who, though the Mother of us all (as Calvin said), has in this field traditionally acted either repressively by forbidding practices stigmatized as "innovations"; or at most permissively (for example, by allowing the use of the *Book of Common Order*, 1940); but has seldom in three hundred years of history risen to the responsibility of *positive* guidance?

Such a Church cannot readily contract out of the implications of her past mental habit. She cannot be expected to enjoin compliance, except in matters regarded as of the very essence of faith or good order—as she may yet choose to do in respect of Baptism. Yet surely she need not hesitate to inform, to instruct, to *permit*. To enjoin compliance with a uniform order, let alone form of service, would certainly be imprudent, unless there had already come into being a genuine *consensus fidelium*. But it is precisely the emergence of that *consensus fidelium* through fuller knowledge that we may legitimately hope for, and that the Assembly might set before it as its objective. At the very least it ought to be unthinkable that any divinity student leave College (as all too many ministers who are now in mid-life once did) without any working knowledge of liturgical history and principle. Yet the issue is wider than this. The whole Church—the *laos*, clergy and people alike—is involved.

Given profounder insights and wider knowledge on the part of minister and congregation alike, along with permissive sanctions by the General Assembly, any congregation that felt moved to enrich and strengthen the *corporate* action in its worship, by *Salutation* or other colloquy of bidding and response, by Canticle, Creed, or other utterances of *common* prayer, could feel encouraged to do so, relieved of the distracting (and false) thought that in some way it was proving untrue to the essential tradition of a Church Reformed, Evangelical, and Catholic.

But above all there must be the recovery of authority : and the authority is that of Christ Himself. It is “ by Him alone ” that we do this thing. Perhaps it is here that there lies our first problem.

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