

The Selection of the Praise for Public Worship

THE Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion has seldom done anything better fitted to serve both the purposes which, as its name indicates, it is intended to promote, than in publishing the little *Outline and Brief Explanation of Public Worship*⁽¹⁾, which is now at the service of the Church. It can hardly be gainsaid that even many of our most faithful people have only the haziest of ideas as to the precise necessity of the acts included in a normal service, and the reason for the arrangement of these acts, which is axiomatic to those responsible for it. Whatever uncertainty exists ought now to be cleared away, for in this leaflet the successive acts are set out with explanations which, while of the briefest, are clear enough to make plain the nature and intention of each, and the way in which all combine to constitute a comprehensive and orderly offering of a people's worship to God.

The purpose of the publication will be missed if it is not given a wide circulation among the rank and file of our congregations. It is for their benefit, and ministers who take the trouble to put it into their hands, with their own cordial commendation, will get a rich reward in the keener intelligence and increased spirituality with which their people take part in the service.

But ministers may themselves benefit by certain of the suggestions. An attempt is made, for instance, to indicate what the nature of the various acts of praise should be. This part of public worship sometimes wears a look of casualness, as if it followed a line of its own without relation to the general order of service, or as if it had been flung together without any guiding reason at all. Occasionally, indeed, the heterogeneousness of the selection suggests a suspicion that the minister has abdicated his function of choice, and turned it over to the organist; and since the organist's canon of judgment, naturally, is not so much that of spiritual as of musical value, some bewilderment as to the principle of choice might be expected. It is useful, therefore, to have suggestions offered as to what note may be most fittingly struck in each of the acts of praise.

No such suggestions, of course, will satisfy everybody.

⁽¹⁾ Obtainable at Church of Scotland Publications Office, 121 George Street, Edinburgh.

Alternatives will be easy to propose. In the second act, for example, what could more suitably follow the prayer of confession and supplication than a psalm or hymn keyed upon either or both of these notes ? And in the fourth act, who would not agree that a sung intercession, as for the nation, the world, missions, the Kingdom of God, would be perfectly in place ? It is impossible, in a small leaflet, to indicate the whole gamut of the possibilities to which the various acts might fittingly be tuned. The important matter is, that careful thought should be given, not only to the individual selections of what is to be sung, but to the congruity of what is chosen with its place and context in the symphony of worship. It may be helpful to point to three general principles which should be kept in mind in ordering this part of a service.

The first is, that a *considered variety* should be observed in the selection. It is a mistake, psychologically, to fit all the acts of praise into a single mould. There is a predilection, widely spread, for what is called "heartly singing." Not seldom it is pandered to by an avoidance of psalms and hymns which are not consonant with that demand. But nothing is more wearisome, and nothing tends to become more desolatingly unreal, than an unbroken succession of things that are sung, so to speak, with all the stops out. Always, in every congregation, there are people present who are undergoing heart-searching experiences, and to whom loud-voiced singing is the reverse of a natural or congenial form of expression ; their need should be remembered. And even those whose preference is for singing of the hearty type will find the provision made for them more satisfying, if, alternating with it, there are acts of a quieter order, penitential, meditative, devotional, such as accord with the need of those the lights of whose souls are burning low.

Contrariwise, it is a mistake to restrict the choice to hymns of the introspective type. It has been remarked as a weakness of Protestant worship that it tends to encourage individualism by making its acts egocentric. There is indubitable justice in the criticism. Nothing is commoner than for people to estimate the value of a religious service by the subjective impression it has produced upon themselves. They have not the slightest idea of anything not being as it ought to be, when they make the "good" it has done them, or failed to do them, the measure of all things, the absolute standard of values. As if *they* were the centres round which all that is done in the House of God revolves ! That is re-

versing the order in which God and the worshipper should stand ; it is making the sun revolve round the earth ! Something is wrong when what professes to be the worship of God is so used as to tread more deeply in upon the consciousness that preoccupation with self, that conviction of the all-importance of self and its moods and feelings and demands, which is one of the chief and most insidious of our temptations. From that grave error real worship of God should be a release. Hymns of the introspective and egotistical sort, that fix the mind on the emotions and concerns of the personal life, should find only a subordinate place in the texture of public worship; the main themes should be objective, lifting the soul above its engrossing self-concern into adoring contemplation of the glory of God and His grace in His blessed Son.

(2) The second principle is that of *relevance* : each act should be related to its place in the service and to the context of the other acts which form its neighbourhood. Some years ago, when a Prime Minister was present at service in one of our churches, the newspapers remarked next day with apparent approval that the first act was the singing of Psalm 124 —“Now Israel may say ”—to its incomparable proper tune. The first act ! The question could not but suggest itself : Why, in a time of peace, when no signal deliverance from their cruel enemies was setting people’s souls a-throb with thankfulness, should a paean of praise of so rare and topical a kind strike the first note in the praise offered by them to God ? There was nothing in the immediate context of their circumstances or in the thoughts naturally uppermost in their minds as they approached the worship of God, to make such an outburst, at that particular point, a proper form of expression. Why then was it chosen ? Almost certainly because whoever selected it was thinking, not of relevance at all, but simply of musical effectiveness—of what would start the service with such a magnificent body of vocal tone as would produce a “spinal thrill ” in the congregation.

An instance of an opposite kind occurred in the writer’s hearing, in a famous Edinburgh church. The service opened with the thing usually called an “In-troit.” Out of a wide range of possibilities the organist’s choice fell, for this purpose, upon that verse of a well-known evening hymn which begins, “Guard us waking, guard us sleeping.” Here also the organist had made his choice, thinking solely of musical effectiveness, and not at all of devotional relevance and suitability. The result, for those who had any sense of humour,

was an excitation of feelings the reverse of worshipful, and an exposure of the service at the outset to the risk of being spiritually a failure. Such dangers emphasise the necessity of the minister not surrendering his function of choice to anyone, since it is his responsibility alone to think of the spiritual proprieties at every point, of the relation of one part with another, and of the relation of all the parts to the whole. They emphasise also the need for thinking out the whole service in advance, so that it may not be endangered by thrusting into it at the eleventh hour an extraneous element of so disturbing a kind.

(3) The third principle that should be kept in mind is that of *progression*. There should be movement in a service. It ought not to be a series of variations on a single theme. There is much to be said for restricting a sermon to the presentation and enforcement of a single idea ; but when the one idea dominates the entire service, governing the choice of all the praise, the service is bound to suffer serious detriment. Stringing of all the beads on the sermonic thread tends to achieve monotony in a series of acts which ought to be so designed as to reflect in some degree the variousness of the many-coloured wisdom and grace of God. Dangers of such a kind will be obviated if the service is not allowed to become static in idea, but moves forward in a realisable progress, from point to point, in a clearly articulated order, advancing steadily as to a goal.

Quite probably, the people who participate in a service thus shaped into consistency will have no idea of the care spent upon arranging it, or of the felicitousness with which the parts are composed into a satisfying whole ; but the thoughtful and spiritually-minded among them will know that they have been well guided in the ordering of a service which has enabled them to offer of their best in their worship of God.

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