

The Language of Worship

A CHURCH OF SCOTLAND POINT OF VIEW

(Reprinted with the permission of *Societas Liturgica*).

SOME four centuries of Reformed worship in the English tongue have produced in the Church of Scotland an accepted language of worship which is Scripturally based, and which is, in type, solemn if at times pompous, and traditional to the point of being archaic. It is natural that in face of the modern problems of communication and in view of declining church-going, the adequacy and relevance of this traditional language of worship are being questioned, and the use of a more modern and contemporary language is being discussed and explored.

The language of the original *Book of Common Order, 1564 (Knox's Liturgy)* is heavy and verbose, didactic and hortatory ; and it indicates an attitude of abject servility before God, as though to make men His serfs rather than His children. (This, of course, is a reflection of the quasi-feudal society of the sixteenth century in contrast to the modern democratic society). For example, the Confession of sin in Knox's Order of Public Worship has this opening passage :

“ O Eternal God and most merciful Father, we confess and acknowledge here before Thy Divine Majesty, that we are miserable sinners, conceived and born in sin and iniquity, so that in us there is no goodness; for the flesh evermore rebelleth against the Spirit, whereby we continually transgress Thy holy precepts and commandments, and so do purchase to ourselves, through Thy just judgment, death and damnation. Notwithstanding, O heavenly Father, forasmuch as we are displeased with ourselves for the sins that we have committed against Thee, and do unfeignedly repent us of the same, we most humbly beseech Thee, for Jesus Christ's sake, to show Thy mercy upon us, to forgive us all our sins, and to increase Thy Holy Spirit in us, that we, acknowledging from the bottom of our hearts our own unrighteousness, may from henceforth not only mortify our sinful lusts and affections, but also bring forth such fruits as may be agreeable to Thy most blessed will, not for the worthiness thereof, but for the merits of Thy dearly beloved Son Jesus Christ our only Saviour, whom

Thou hast already given, an oblation and offering for our sins, and for whose sake we are certainly persuaded that Thou wilt deny us nothing that we shall ask in His name according to Thy will.’’

A correction in the direction of less wordiness and more felicitous phraseology came from the influence upon Scottish worship at the time of the English *Book of Common Prayer* (1549 onwards). It is widely acknowledged that the English, particularly of Cranmer’s vernacular, has stood the test of time. But the decisive factor both in improving and in stabilising the language of vernacular worship was the *Authorized Version of the Bible* (1611). This translation of the Scriptures has proved one of the most significant elements in all subsequent writing and speaking of the English tongue. Its language stamped itself upon Scottish worship and has remained of paramount influence.

The last printed forms of prayer in the immediate post-Reformation period were in the *Scottish Prayer Book of 1637* (miscalled Laud’s Liturgy): an echo of the English Book of Common Prayer, its language is dignified and traditionalist. *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (1645) followed as the authoritative norm in the Church of Scotland, and it has its place among the other documents from the Westminster Assembly of Divines, accorded a respect and authority subordinate only to the supreme rule of Holy Scripture. The Directory provides for every aspect of public worship. The practical consequence of this was that after 1645, the language of the Authorized Version was the supreme influence in the language of worship, and it has remained the essential standard and pattern.

The absence in the Church of Scotland for about two centuries (1645-1857) of printed forms of prayers makes evidence about the language of public worship between the post-Reformation period and the latter part of the nineteenth century difficult to ascertain. When the *Renascence (sic) of Worship* came in the middle of last century, it was partly in revolt against the verbosity and pomposity rampant in the language of public prayer in Scotland. The Rev. Dr. Robert Lee of Greyfriars, Edinburgh (c. 1857) speaks of many ministers at prayer ‘‘ plunging on each occasion into a great wilderness of thought and language—like Abraham, who went forth not knowing whither he went ’’; and he further criticized the prayers current in the Church of Scotland for ‘‘ their tedious length—their incoherence—their perpetual repetitions—their didactic and sermonizing character—their

consisting of little but a string of unconnected quotations from Scripture—their want of solemnity, beauty, devotion, or some other quality or qualities which should especially distinguish prayer.”

The new concern and interest in the form and content of worship meant that printed forms of prayers once more became available, with, first, *Prayers for Public Worship* (Greyfriars Church, Edinburgh, first edition 1857); and then the widely influential and frequently revised and re-issued *Euchologion or Book of Common Order*, published by the Church Service Society (first edition, 1867). The language of the *Euchologion* now seems somewhat wordy, ponderous and abstract. Its devotional forms reflect both the different social structure and the different theological climate of the Victorian age—a more hierarchical society where deference and respect were assumed, and a more sentimental and other-wordly religious outlook. Confession of sin is given this expression :

“ O Lord our God, eternal and almighty Father, we acknowledge and confess before Thy holy majesty that we are sinners by nature and by wicked works ; unable of ourselves to do that which is good ; transgressing daily, and in many ways, Thy holy commandments, and by Thy just judgment deserving of condemnation and death.

We are deeply grieved, O Lord, for having offended against Thee. We condemn both ourselves and our sins with unfeigned penitence ; we seek refuge in Thy mercy, and humbly entreat Thee to help us in our misery.”;

while petition has rather an abstract tone :

“ Give us good and holy thoughts, pure, gentle, and peaceable dispositions, an entire resignation to Thy will, a perfect love to Thee, and a sincere charity towards all mankind.

Wean our hearts from the vanity of this world, and give us grace to lift them up to heaven where our treasure is ; so that watching and praying without ceasing, and living in temperance, righteousness, and piety, we may pass our days in peace, waiting for the glorious return of our Saviour ; and that when He shall come to judge the world, we may appear before Him without confusion, and without fear.”

The more recent service-books in the Church of Scotland, which are now issued under the authority of the General Assembly, including *Prayers for Divine Service* (1923 and

1929) and the *Book of Common Order*, 1928, both now superseded by the current *Book of Common Order*, 1940, have only partially succeeded in eradicating pomposity, verbosity and vagueness from the language of their prayers. Much remains to be done in the way of revision in order to achieve a language which, while Scripturally based, is crisper, simpler and more objective. To illustrate the development we note that prayer for the Nation in *Euchologion* (1867) is couched in rather pedantic and sententious terms :

“ We pray Thee for our native land, and for Thy servant her most sacred Majesty, Queen Victoria, that in all her thoughts, words and works, she may ever seek Thine honour and glory, and study to preserve Thy people committed to her charge in wealth, peace and godliness”;

yet in the *Book of Common Order*, 1940, we still have such a ponderous form as :

“ Almighty God, in whose hand are the hearts of princes ; we beseech Thee to direct and govern all kings, rulers and magistrates, and all to whom Thou hast committed authority. Bless Thy servant Elizabeth our Queen Maintain and increase the noble estate of the Queen’s Majesty, her Royal House, her ministers and counsellors, and the whole body of the Commonwealth”

There is a growing feeling that as a norm for the Church of Scotland, the *Book of Common Order*, 1940, is in urgent need of revision, both to incorporate fresh liturgical knowledge and insight, and, even more, to offer a more suitable type of language for use in the worship of Almighty God. Thus the Church of Scotland finds herself caught up in the present widespread search for a language in worship which may restore a sense of relevance and reality to public prayer. Great interest is taken in experiments carried out in other confessions. The *de novo* quest by the Roman Catholic Church for a viable vernacular is of the greatest concern and interest to the churches which have been accustomed to use the English tongue in divine service for many centuries. Many Scottish churchmen read with deep interest and give the closest scrutiny to the material issued by the Roman Catholic *International Committee on English in the Liturgy*.

Two contrasting needs must be remembered in seeking for a meaningful and significant language of prayer. The first requirement is clarity, directness and objectivity, but, secondly, aesthetic fitness, stemming both from the intrinsic

beauty of the language and from its rhythmic flow, must not be neglected. The exclusive emphasis on the former concern for the meaningful can result in angular and arid forms, while an over-emphasis on the aesthetic can produce vagueness and obscurity. A happy balance is exacting to achieve !

Directness and objectivity will be advanced by a resolute exclusion from forms of prayer of manifestly obsolete and archaic words and phrases, and of pedantic and involved sentence-forms (e.g., forasmuch as ; through the same our Lord ; vouchsafe ; we, Thy servants, miserable sinners ; may it please Thee ; most earnestly we entreat Thee ; etc.) Further self-consciously framed stylistic writing, employing lengthy periods and unnecessary epithets, is quite out of place in the language of public prayer. This standard will expel the "purple passages", characteristic of many written prayers a generation ago. What is merely emotional or aesthetic and of a mistakenly sensuous quality must be resisted, for public prayer is not an expression of personal emotion or ardour, but the intelligent, objective, devotional will of a corporate fellowship. The repetitive element, particularly in the conventional phrases of liturgy, must be curtailed (e.g., we beseech Thee, O Lord ; we pray Thee ; grant that ; bless . . . ; etc.).

It is to be conceded then that the choice of suitable language for public worship is to a considerable degree an issue of English style, but stylistic quality is notably lacking from most writing of English today. The stylistic situation has been high-lighted by the *New English Bible* version of the New Testament which may have achieved greater lucidity and intelligibility at points, but is singularly devoid of grace and rhythmical flow, qualities which are required in the language of public prayer. The modern English versions of the Holy Scriptures which preserve some stylistic merit tend to be adaptations of the Authorized Version itself. Both the *Revised Standard Version* and the *Jerusalem Bible* re-echo many of the linguistic cadences and felicitous translations of the Authorized Version, and accordingly they are proving more appropriate for the lections at divine service than is the New English Bible version.

Our consideration of the problem of language really indicates that vernacular English reached its best in clarity and grace of style in the 16th and 17th centuries, viz. in the Authorized Version of the Bible and the plays of William Shakespeare. This so-called Elizabethan English, once it is cleansed of its more obvious and blatant archaisms, is notable

not so much as belonging to the 17th century, as in possessing timeless and undated qualities. This "pure" English had dignified, simple, smooth and meaningful characteristics which are basic requirements in the language of worship. The real quest in our time is for a renewed, "reformed", and revitalised version of such "pure" or "good" English for use in church.

Although this type of language may emerge as our requirement for a language "contemporary" in an undated sense, the questions of modern idiom and of the "Thou-You" choice have still to be faced by liturgical revisers. Church of Scotland opinion is very divided on whether or not to maintain "Thou" and "Thee" in public prayer. Hymns form a very large portion of the people's part in Reformed worship, and our heritage of hymnology is in the "Thou-Thee" tradition, which makes it difficult to switch from the second person singular in praise to the second person plural in prayer, while addressing the same One God ! One thing is clear, however, namely that a change-over to a "You" usage requires far more radical revision of images, phraseology and general style than most present-day adapters of traditional forms have yet sufficiently worked out.

An impressive printed venture in this realm of experiment is *Contemporary Prayers for Public Worship*, edited by Caryl Micklem (S.C.M., London : 1967). Here the style of writing is appropriate to the "You" usage, e.g.

"Lord God, your eyes are open day and night watching your children ; your ears are always ready to listen to their prayer. We have come to worship you. We come as sinners, in need of your forgiveness. We come tired from our work, in need of refreshment and recreation. We come with worries, in need of your guidance. But first, please lift us out of our preoccupation with our own needs. Allow us to see you with the eyes of faith, and to hear with understanding what you say to us. Make us thankful for all the good we have received from you. Awaken in us a longing to do what is right. And make us aware of the great company, past, present and to come, with whom we join to worship you."

Yet this kind of "modern" language can be a temptation towards the catchy phrase or verbal gimmick, which divert from concentration on God. When things go wrong in such a direction, there is an over-stress on the worshippers' emotions and interests at the expense of the true objectivity

of worship. The following prayer for the Church tends to "psychologize" the prayer-situation :

"Eternal God, you know the failure of the Church better than we do, for you have founded it to be yours.

Stop us from treating it as ours.

Re-establish your right over it and make it serve you.

May your will be most done where your name is most hallowed."

Michel Quoist's *Prayers of Life* have an impressive topicality, and exhibit a spiritual vitality in their response to such a variety of human occasions and situations, but their proper use would appear to be for personal devotion. Even if they could be felicitously used in guided corporate meditation, such devotional material could yet never be the basis of the ordered corporate worship of the Christian fellowship. Many of the extremes of supposedly "contemporary" language and even verbal gimmickry are avoided where there is a clear grasp of the inalienable distinction between private devotion and public, corporate worship. The latter requires certain minimal qualities of dignity, objectivity and serenity. In such public worship, relatedness to the contemporary scene, particularly in intercessory prayer, can be achieved in the greatest detail and particularity, through the use of introductory biddings to prayer. Such biddings are free from the linguistic restraints and disciplines which necessarily restrict the wording in the actual forms of prayer.

In general, this examination of language appropriate to public worship suggests that it is necessary to maintain an atmosphere of dignity and exaltation, along with greater clarity, objectivity and relevance. The language employed in any human activity must be in harmony with its content and purpose, hence liturgical language must be an expression of Biblical thought-forms and atmosphere and in character with the Faith itself which is transcendent and eternal. Addressed to God, the language of corporate prayer must also be appropriate to the filial relationship of the household of faith to the Heavenly Father.

Within such guide-lines and limits, there must be that of the majestic and even the mysterious, suitable to the communication of the Mystery of Christ. The important watershed in modern thought lies between those advocating a completely naturalistic and humanistic interpretation of the universe, and those of convinced belief in the supernatural and transcendent. The language of Christian worship must clearly

indicate faith in transcendent reality. This consideration alone will discard the pedestrian, mundane and commonplace in language. The assignment to revisers of liturgical form is accordingly much more exacting than is admitted by those too easily demanding a "contemporary language" which they themselves fail to identify, define or describe. No individualistic approach to the problems can satisfy. What momentarily can be called "contemporary" but is untested as to its ephemeral and passing quality is of little help. Rather, the Biblical revelation of God in His majesty and mercy must stamp its own sovereign imprint on the language of prayer. The whole question is one agonizing aspect of Renewal in the Church of God. Careful and painful experiment is necessary until a vernacular English, more appropriate than any hitherto employed, is achieved for the language of worship.

In this ecumenical age, it will be nothing short of tragic for the future of Christendom, if some of these problems are not solved by the separated confessions examining them together. How enriching and useful it would be to achieve an agreed and universally used English vernacular for some of the liturgical material in common use in all the churches: viz. the Lord's Prayer; The Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds; elements in the eucharistic service, such as the *Sursum Corda*, the *Agnus Dei*, etc. The fact that the *Revised Standard Version* of the Holy Scriptures has been read at united acts of worship in the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity gives hope and promise that this task of a common vernacular may be taken up mutually and ecumenically. In all quarters it is acknowledged that the churches as a whole and their liturgically responsible bodies should give urgent emphasis to the study of the language of worship.

R. STUART LOUDEN