

EDITORIAL

Many of our readers will be familiar with the old chestnut concerning two friends who, on the road home from church, were discussing the sermon. "There were three things wrong with it," said the one to the other. "Firstly, it was read. Secondly, it was badly read. Thirdly, it wasn't worth reading." Might these two, one wonders, have permitted themselves a sneaking glance towards the minister during the prayers, in order to see whether these, too, were being read? Doubtless they, like many others, would view the reading of prayers with disfavour.

Our Society has, from the outset, championed the legitimacy of pre-composed prayer in worship. It would be hard to argue theologically against the practice, for surely the same Holy Spirit who inspired those who wrote our hymns which are sung in a fixed form by succeeding generations, can equally well move a minister to compose or adapt written prayers which will, in the context of worship, be transformed into a fit offering to God the Father through Our Lord Jesus Christ. The minister must, of course, recognize that, in His sovereign freedom, the Spirit may direct him, even in the very midst of offering a set prayer, either to modify it or to depart from it altogether. But he must understand also that the Spirit's intervention is no mere prohibition, for He shall place His own words into the mouth of His servant, so that the prayer may more perfectly be gathered up into the Heavenly Ministry of our Great High Priest.

Let it never be said, however, that our Society deplores, in principle, the offering of fully extemporaneous prayers. Scripture enjoins that "all things should be done decently and in order," and provided this apostolic command is rigorously observed, there can be no grounds for complaint. But the fact of the matter is that many extemporary prayers are (in the non-moral sense!) both indecent and disorderly. Ghastly phrases such as "we just want you to know that....." can be coupled with an inconsistent jumble of "thee" and "you", and the prayers can flit erratically from theme to theme like someone trying to choose a new hat in a shop, so that the worshippers, including probably the minister, have no idea where they have been, where they now are, or where they are going. "God is not a God of confusion." Paul would not be happy in such worship contexts today.

But let us be honest. Written prayers too can be badly offered, not worth offering, or both. Successive sentences can begin on a high pitch and subside slowly down the musical scale like a grounded hot-air balloon gently collapsing under its own weight. The precise subject of an individual collect, especially an intercession, can be cloaked in such oblique and archaic phraseology that its meaning is totally obscured from the worshippers. And, of course, the unspeakably distasteful can be committed to paper long before it is inflicted upon the people of God.

If dignity is not allied with simplicity, and if formality is not blended with homeliness, then the prayers have become as unhelpful as the wholesale and uninterpreted speaking in tongues which Paul was so anxious to discourage. A short, simple, perhaps a little prosaic, but nevertheless coherent, extemporary prayer is infinitely preferable to a tortuous magniloquence which may sound ever so impressive, but which, on close scrutiny, may be saying nothing of any significance at all. Let all our prayers, whether extemporary or prepared, be both well offered and worth offering!

SOCIETY NOTES

This third issue of RECORD is the final one for 1982. Three issues are, as promised, planned for 1983. With the exception of the Centenary Lecture, given in November by Dr. A. Raymond George, the text of which is now in the Editor's hands, there is no fresh material awaiting publication by the Society.

Contributions are urgently requested.

Warm thanks are due to Sir Ronald Johnson, one of our Edinburgh members and a contributor to Issue No. 1, who has kindly agreed to check the typescripts of RECORD prior to their submission to the printer. A number of errors in the Presidential Address, as printed in Issue No. 2 (for which due apology has been made to Dr. Todd), exposed the need for additional help in this area. The corrections to the Address are printed in a separate sheet, enclosed in this issue, and this sheet should be transferred to members' copies of Issue No. 2.

With Issue No. 4 there will come a request for the 1983 subscription from members - again at the rate of £5, but with the prospect, subject to formal approval at our A.G.M., of a reduced subscription for retired members. We apologise that the temporary loss of a page of notes led to a request for the 1982 subscription, with Issue No. 2, from some members who had already paid in full.