

## Public Prayer.

W ORSHIP is a reciprocal activity, the speech and action of man towards God as well as of God towards man. Man addresses God in two ways, in praise and in prayer, and these, so far as they are public, have one characteristic in common; each must be at once personal and peculiar, special to each individual worshipper, and general and catholic, the act of the congregation as a whole. The person must be fused in the society; he must cease to be an individual and merge his being in the larger unity, and yet at the same time he must find the satisfaction of his deepest needs. Prayer is a more complex act than praise, for while it is as broadly congregational it ought to be more deeply personal, and it is this that makes it so difficult for the group. Every one who reflects must feel perplexity and humiliation regarding public prayers. The things man most needs from God he can least bear to ask in the hearing of men: the things the whole congregation needs may meet the case of no single man. Much has been written regarding individual and private prayer, but sufficient consideration has not been given to the difficulties of corporate and collective prayer. Possibly because of this and because only a few men have the power of regularly and helpfully expressing the thought and aspiration of a group, too many have been content to see this side of public worship sink to the level of the "preliminaries," so that we have to confess that if there were no sermon, poor as this very often is, it would hardly be worth while having public worship. Most ministers have to learn to pray just as they have to learn to preach. They have to learn by private prayer, by hard thinking about the whole subject, and by thorough preparation for that part of the service.

Public and private prayer is often divided into Confession, Thanksgiving, and Intercession, but this is not an exhaustive classification. If we accept William James's definition that prayer is "every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine," we shall have to add Meditation. How are these divisions recognized in our worship? In Nonconformist services, at different times and in different places, public worship is made to include seven different prayers, or eight if the Lord's Prayer be considered

by itself. There is:—(1) Invocation, (2) Adoration, Thanksgiving and Confession—often known as the “long” prayer. (3) Intercession, (4) after the Offertory, (5) after the Announcements, (6) before the Sermon—the “Prayer for Illumination,” (7) after the Sermon. Baptists usually combine (2) and (3) into what has become too often a subdued devotional oration, which forms perhaps the most difficult and the weakest part of our service. There seems need that we distinguish more than we do the four kinds of prayer already enumerated; we need to make the acts of worship “distinct, comprehensive, and progressive.” Our practical difficulties are great. There are always people coming into the services after they have commenced, and since we do not think it irreverent for them to walk in during a hymn we have several at short intervals in the early part of the service, and place what we know as the “long” prayer in the middle. It has been urged by some that at the beginning, after the Invocation and Preface of the service, is the place for the Confession of Sins. “The congregation having placed itself consciously in the presence of God, the instinct of every devout heart is to recall in that presence its own uncleanness and unworthiness. Hence the service proper opens *most* fittingly with a General Confession of Sin and a Petition for Divine Forgiveness.” (J. O. Dykes: *The Christian Minister and His Duties*, p. 131). However desirable this may be, it is doubtful whether the average congregation is, at the beginning of public worship, ready to confess; it is, however, in the mood to give thanks. Later on it may be led to the more intimate and self-revealing act, but it must be led with care. Modern psychology has emphasized the folly of merely negative suggestions. If we start with our minds chiefly occupied with the suggestion of our sin and weakness, we are inviting the assaults of evil. The cringing and wailing attitude of many prayers of confession is hardly Christian. As a recent writer has said:—“Consider for a moment what sort of home life that would be in which the children were for ever cowering down before their father and saying: ‘O most merciful Lord, be kind to me: I acknowledge I am but a worm: I cannot hope that I am worthy to have my breakfast: indeed, I deserve to starve. I can only hope for my breakfast because of your extreme mercy; but still I dare to hope. You have given me my breakfast before: You have given others their breakfasts: You have a great name for mercy: You will surely not fall below it: if You give it me I will spend the rest of the day praising your undeserved goodness.’” Jesus did not teach men so to pray. The object of the life of prayer is to keep the gate of the mind open to

and to make our own all those suggestions which come from God—suggestions of His Kingdom, His power and His glory. As Baudouin puts it, "Veni Creator" is a far more potent exorcism than "Retro Satanas."

Of the other prayers only a word can be said. It must be admitted at once that few men can satisfactorily compose a General Intercession, which shall adequately express the needs of the congregation, in the pulpit. Accurate knowledge, sympathy and understanding are essential, and success can only be achieved after careful preparation. Prayer before and after the sermon needs careful handling. Dykes says that "it is well to swathe the Word in prayer" (op. cit. p. 146), but it depends on "the Word" and on the prayers. There is room for far more use than is usually made of periods of silence, not simply that individuals may offer up the prayers, which are in their hearts and which the minister has not voiced, but that there may be meditation and communion, a waiting upon God. That this can be appreciated, in time, at any rate, not simply by Quakers and the well-educated, but by ordinary folk and even by children, has been proved by those who have put it to the test. Instead of the spoken prayer after the sermon, a period of silence would often be far more effective and helpful.

The Lord's Prayer should find a place at least once in a service. In theory it should certainly not be sung, but if by the use of a simple chant more of the congregation are drawn to take part than would otherwise be the case, then its singing seems to be justified. It needs to be kept in mind, however, that it is a prayer, and not a mere addition to the musical part of the service.

An additional reason for keeping Confession, Thanksgiving, Intercession, and Meditation as distinct as possible, having a number of shorter prayers with definite objects rather than one long one, is that whether for kneeling or sitting with bowed heads, pews are not the most suitable nor comfortable of places; attention inevitably wanders, and if some are inattentive or restive, prayer has ceased to be a congregational act. Five or seven minutes seems the longest period that should be spent at one time during a service in prayer. The language which may be used troubles some, and the style in which prayers should be cast. There are four things to be avoided:—(1) archaic and meaningless phrases. Dr. Dale writes: "Phrases which, when they were fresh were very beautiful but from which the delicate bloom has long ago been quite rubbed off: heterogeneous fragments of ill-remembered and ill-applied sentences from the Psalms of David, prophecies of Isaiah, and the hymns of Watts and Wesley—these to a man who is offering prayer may seem to express his own

devotional feeling, but they do not really express it, and they make it very difficult for many who are listening to him to maintain a devotional temper." (*Lectures on Preaching*, p. 171.)

(2) Too formal speech. Some prayers are too like an address to royalty. (3) Familiar speech, which is in danger of becoming profanity. (4) Eloquence or preaching in prayer. In forming a vocabulary for prayer nothing is more helpful than a knowledge of the Bible and of the devotional literature of the Church, not that it may be slavishly copied, but that it may teach us how to express the deepest things of the heart. "I quote others," said Montaigne, "only in order the better to express myself." Dr. Dale suggests that "it might be well to determine in prayer to use those words only which are found in the Authorized Version of the Bible" (op. cit. 174), but few would to-day feel satisfied with such a restriction.

The old question of the relative value of extempore and liturgical prayer is still more of an issue among Baptists than among some other Nonconformists. There are many churches, large as well as small, where a minister who ventures to read his prayers is regarded with undisguised suspicion. It is urged on behalf of free or extempore prayer that it encourages the grace of prayer, that it gives life and freshness, that it enables particular and comforting reference, and that it allows a tenderness of heart and nearness to God impossible under any set form. It is commended by Dr. Dale for its "simplicity, directness, pathos, reverence, fervour." On the other hand the supporters of a liturgy point out its stateliness of thought and charm of style, and suggest that it lifts us above sectarian and provincial ideas of religion, expresses ordinary wants of all kinds and conditions of men, makes worshippers more independent of the minister, binds together the congregation, is suitable for the old, the weary and the young, and can be taught to children. A compromise is necessary; opportunity for extempore prayers, in addition to those prepared and read. Freedom and spontaneity must be maintained, and the evils and abuses of both types realized. The growth of culture in the last century has made people increasingly susceptible to those little things which make the difference between the man with a gift for public prayer and the ordinary minister. As Dr. John Watson once said:—"People will not endure that a coarse man should harangue the Almighty at the pitch of his voice or a weak man go maundering into His presence in their name." Even those who, like Dr. Dale, oppose liturgical prayers, are forced to recognize the need for careful preparation for public prayer, not simply of subjects and order of thought, but also of the actual words. Reading a prayer does not seem any less reverent than

repeating it from memory. Extempore prayer is the ideal in a small group, and in a large one if there be real unity of spirit and fellowship, and if he who leads is able to interpret adequately the needs and aspirations of the rest; but too often these conditions are not fulfilled, and then an ordered form of service seems less likely to give offence, and more likely to prove helpful. It has the further advantage that if a form of Litany is used the congregation themselves realize that their worship is a corporate act.

It is recorded in the life of Dr. Dale by his son that an old woman who attended the services in Birmingham used to say: "I can't understand his sermons, but his prayers do me so much good that I always *come*." We cannot all be Dales, but we can realize our own weaknesses and give to the prayers their due place in our worship and the attention they require.

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## George Fox and Roger Williams.

### A Battle of Giants.

IN the years 1671-73 George Fox, visiting the American colonies, accomplished what Dr. Rufus M. Jones calls "a piece of colonial missionary labour, which, so far as I know, no visitor to America in colonial times paralleled." In the course of this wonderful missionary journey\* the Quaker pioneer came to Rhode Island, and there he narrowly (and to a certain extent unaccountably) missed a Homeric encounter with the redoubtable Roger Williams. Fox arrived at Newport on 30th May, 1672. The "yearly meeting," held soon afterwards, was a memorable occasion. Both the Governor (Nicholas Easton) and his deputy sat in the sessions, and people flocked in from all parts of the island and the country round about.

Roger Williams (says Dr. Jones) "though heroically devoted to liberty of thought and speech, was by mental constitution and temperament impervious to the message of the Friends. He was by natural bent of mind unmystical, and he had no sympathy with the idea of inward personal revela-

\* See article upon "George Fox's Missionary Labours in America," by Henry J. Cowell, in the *Holborn Review* for July, 1924.