

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Verbal Revision of the Prayer-Book.

BY THE REV. E. J. WOLFE,

Vicar of St. Thomas', Telford Park, S.W.

AMONG the resolutions formally adopted by the recent Lambeth Conference is one in which the necessity is laid down for the "change of words obscure or commonly misunderstood" in any revision of the Prayer-Book which may be undertaken.

How has this necessity arisen? And what changes are necessary?

1. With the exception of some of the "occasional services," which have been added to or revised in comparatively modern times, the bulk of our English Prayer-Book assumed its present form at varying dates between 1544 (the translation of the Litany) and 1661 (the Savoy Conference revision).

The continuous portions of Scripture, such as the Epistles and Gospels, are from the Authorized Version of the Bible, 1611, but the Prayer-Book version of the Psalms is that of the "Great English Bible," 1539.

Our present service-book, therefore, is almost entirely in language in use from 250 to 360 years ago. It is easy to understand how, during such a length of time, many changes must have taken place in our language. Living languages reflect the vicissitudes of the peoples who use them. "In the course of a nation's progress new ideas are evermore mounting above the horizon, while others are lost sight of and sink below it; others, again, change their form and aspect; others which seem united split into parts. And as it is with ideas, so is it with their symbols, words. New ones are perpetually coined to meet the demand of an advanced understanding, of new feelings that have sprung out of the decay of old ones, of ideas that have shot forth from the summit of the tree of our knowledge. Old words meanwhile fall into disuse and become obsolete; others have their meaning narrowed and defined; synonyms diverge from each other and their property is parted

between them ; nay, whole classes of words will now and then be thrown overboard, as new feelings or perceptions of analogy gain ground" (Archdeacon Hare, quoted in Trench's "Past and Present"). Indeed, the wonder, in view of the circumstances, is, not that there should be "obscure and commonly misunderstood words" in the Prayer-Book, but that their number is not much greater than it is—nay, might it not well have happened, considering the influence our English Bible and Prayer-Book have had upon our common speech, that many words, familiarized and kept alive by them and so in current use to-day, would have died long ago, if the language of these books had been continuously and at short intervals revised and brought up to date.

2. An exhaustive list of desirable verbal alterations in the Book of Common Prayer is not attempted here. A few typical examples are given by way of illustration, and to exonerate, if need be, the Bishops' resolution from any possibility of being thought superfluous. But first we should like to point out wherein the danger of misconception lies. Not in the presence of archaic or obsolete words, the very unfamiliarity of which insures some inquiry as to their signification, but in that of words which are still in everyday use, with meanings more or less removed from those which they once possessed. "These are as hidden rocks, which are the more dangerous that their very existence is unsuspected. . . . Words that have changed their meanings have often a deceivableness about them ; a reader not once doubts but that he knows their intention ; he is visited with no misgivings that they possess for him another force than that which they possessed for the author in whose writings he finds them, and which they conveyed to *his* contemporaries (Trench's "Past and Present").

It may be objected, perhaps, that some of the under-mentioned examples are puerile in their simplicity, and so well recognized as unlikely to be misconceived by anybody ; but we can assure our readers that not one is cited but has in our experience proved a stumbling-block to inadequately instructed

users of our Prayer-Book. Indeed, it would be well if teachers—the clergy especially—were to assume a little less familiarity on the part of learners, with even foundation truths, than they are sometimes wont to do. It will not, then, perhaps be out of place to start with one instance where the clergy themselves often give the weight of their example to a misused word.

How common to see in Church papers advertisements for “curates wanted,” or by “curates wanting curacies!” How frequently is “my curate” spoken of when “my colleague” or “my assistant” would both sound more courteous and be more correct. “The Curate’s Lot” is the title of a correspondence which appeared lately in a London daily paper. In each of these instances the correct designation should be curate-assistant or stipendiary-curate. “Curate,” unmodified, is in Prayer-Book language one having a “cure,” or “care,” of souls—*e.g.*, the incumbent of a parish. It was, no doubt, acquaintance with the word only in its popular sense that led a by no means ill-educated or unintelligent member of a former congregation to ask the writer in all sincerity: “Why do you pray for “all Bishops and curates” while the rectors and vicars are left out in the cold?” It may be, perhaps, inadvisable, or even impossible, to alter now the popular use of “curate,” but if so, the Prayer-Book use should be made clear.

Several words which present no difficulty to a reader of even the slightest classical knowledge are veritable pitfalls to those who know them only in their English dress. Take as examples two words often associated, “Hell,” “Damnation.” The former is ambiguous, as the translation of two Greek words with widely differing significations—“Hades,” the abode of departed spirits, or sometimes simply “the grave” and “Gehenna,” the place of final punishment of the impenitent. It would be a great gain if the corresponding Greek words were substituted for “Hell” wherever it occurs, as has been done in the “Revised Version.”

“Damnation” is susceptible of a variety of meanings. Sometimes it stands merely for “judgment,” sometimes for

“condemnation,” sometimes for the “loss” or “punishment” that follows condemnation. In view of its universally forcible but objectionable meaning on the lips of “the man in the street,” it is surely advisable that its appearance in our formularies should be as restricted as possible.

The example that occurs most readily to our minds when the subject of “changed meanings” of words is mentioned is that of “prevent” (preventing). “*Prevent* us, O Lord, in all our doings” (Collect at the end of the Communion Office). “By Thy special Grace *preventing* us” (Collect for Easter Day). “We pray Thee that Thy Grace may always *prevent* and follow us” (Collect, Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity). Little as it may be thought, there are still members of our congregations who, puzzled by the use of the word in these places, think, when they try to solve the puzzle at all, that it in some way means *hinder* us from going astray, and who have therefore to be told that, whereas now “prevent” suggests going in front to stop the way, it originally conveyed, and in our Prayer-Book still conveys, the idea of the help and protection to be afforded by a friendly pioneer, courier, or advanced guard.

This particular example is especially worthy of attention, not merely because it shows the perfect *volte face* words may in process of time come to make (here from “help” to “hinder”), but because it illustrates a remarkable tendency which words often exhibit to deteriorate in meaning by use.

Side by side with “prevent,” we may well place “let”—a word which has gone through very similar changes, but in an exactly opposite direction, so that the two words have almost, as it were, changed places.

In our Prayer-Book—“Sore *let* and hindered” (Collect, Fourth Sunday in Advent) *cf.* also 2 Thess. ii. 7—“let” is the modern “prevent,” “hinder”; while in the speech of to-day, if not the active “help,” it is the neutral “permit,” “allow.”

Another word belonging to the same class of “degenerates” as “prevent” is “indifferent” (indifferently)—“rites and ceremonies . . . being things in their own nature *indifferent*”

(Preface to Prayer-Book). "That they may truly and *indifferently* minister justice" (Prayer for the Church Militant). Here the change is almost as great as in the case of "prevent." In current speech the force is "bad," "badly," "an *indifferent* sermon." "He reads *indifferently*." The original meaning was quite other—"inclining to neither side," "without respect of persons," "neutral," "impartial."

Tempt (temptation) also illustrates the same downward tendency in the development of some words, but, with this feature of added interest, that in our books the old meaning is not either everywhere retained or everywhere superseded. Both old and new meanings are found. The process of change is at work, but is not completed.

The original meaning, "to prove," "to try," "to make trial of," may be clearly seen in Gen. xxii. 1, "And it came to pass after these things that God did *tempt* Abraham," where we certainly cannot attach the modern signification of direct solicitation to wrong-doing to the act of the Almighty. In this same neutral sense of trial, without, necessarily, reference to any desired evil issue, it probably occurs in the Collect for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, "Carry us through all *temptations*," and also, possibly, in the Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into *temptation*"; but in the Collect for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity, "To withstand the *temptations* of the world, the flesh, and the devil," we can have no hesitation in giving it the full force of its modern bad significance. It is probably also used in the same sense in the Service for the Visitation of the Sick, "Give him strength against all his *temptations*."

Other examples of deterioration occurring in our services and liable to misconstruction are :

"Vulgar," now "common," in the sense of "low," "ill-bred," but originally "belonging to the people"; so "the vulgar tongue," the language of the country as opposed to a foreign tongue, and, considering one of the great principles of the Reformation, as especially opposed to Latin.

“Charity,” a much colder-sounding word to-day than its true equivalent “love.” “Charity children,” “charity sermon”—almost contemptuous! How it ever could have caught this tone for those familiar with St. Paul’s exquisite exposition of its essence and graces, or become narrowed down to mere *giving* with no thought of sympathy behind it, is strange indeed!

“Usury”: at first merely a return from money out at “use,” simply “interest,” and so used in St. Matt. xxv. 27, but now with a sense of exorbitance and illegality, and thus, not infrequently, in the Bible. See also Psalm xv. 6 (Prayer-Book Version).

The *Quincunque Vult*, better known as the “Athanasian Creed,” has long been the object of special attention from those who desire its revision, both from the point of view of doctrine and of language. So great has the force of the arguments in the latter case been felt to be that the Bishops in a special resolution have affirmed the need for a new translation, and asked the Archbishop of Canterbury to take the necessary steps to provide one.

A single instance of a probably almost universally misunderstood word from this formulary will suffice.

“Incomprehensible”—“The Father *incomprehensible*, the Son *incomprehensible*, and the Holy Ghost *incomprehensible*.” A gentleman, who paid more attention than most ordinary worshippers to the words and sentiments put into his mouth by our Church, once triumphantly concluded a fierce tirade against the Creed and the wickedness of demanding, on pain of “perishing everlastingly,” a profession of belief in “the person and nature of God as expressed in the most metaphysical terms. God, a Being the very same document declares to be in His threefold personality absolutely *incomprehensible!*” He was somewhat taken aback, but certainly not appeased, by the remark of the writer: “‘Incomprehensible’ is here used in its classical sense, ‘immense,’ ‘that cannot be contained or limited.’” There was justice in his retort: “Humph! Is it? Then why doesn’t it say so?”

We turn to the Litany for our next examples.

"Passion"—"By Thy Cross and Passion." Here, and in five other places in the Prayer-Book, this word is used in the passive sense of "suffering," and is by no means intended to suggest, as it undoubtedly does, to readers unacquainted with its derivation and history, an outburst of ungoverned temper. It is the more necessary to point this out as in two places—the Accession Service Prayer (but omitted from the service now authorized), "our sinful passions," and the First Article, "Without body parts or passions"—the plural is used with its familiar modern force.

"Wealth"—"In all time of our wealth" (see also the Prayer for the King in Morning and Evening Prayer, and the Second Prayer for the King in the Communion Office). An example of a class of words alluded to by Archdeacon Hare in the quotation given above, originally possessing an extended meaning, which has in process of time become narrowed and restricted in application. In the common speech of to-day *wealth* connotes only one form of "well-being"—namely, money, or its equivalent. It arouses sad reflections on human tendencies to be reminded that the idea of "well-being" should be made synonymous with "the abundance of things which we possess"; yet who shall say there are not many in our congregations to-day using *wealth* in this degenerate sense in their prayers! The positive harm which may thus result from a misconception of the words we employ will not, of course, in all instances, be of the same degree. There are many passages, "commonly misunderstood," where probably no great harm is done; but in all cases our intelligent use of the words must suffer. Take the phrase "the *kindly* fruits of the earth." We are confident that many users of the Litany pay no attention whatever to the qualifying word "kindly," and never, even in their own minds, give it any particular meaning. If asked to explain they will probably say, "Kindly, I suppose, in the sense of serviceable to us," or, "kindly, because evidences of God's *kindness* to us." How puzzled all such persons would be to read a passage quoted by Trench from More's "Life of Richard III.," where he

relates that Richard calculated by murdering his nephews to be accounted "a *kindly* King"!

Kindly fruits are "natural fruits"—fruits brought forth "after their kind," and a "kindly King," in More's language, was a King in the natural descent, which Richard hoped to be thought when he had removed the more direct heirs to the throne.

Another interesting word with "changed meaning" not much affecting the sense is *dearth*—to-day a synonym for scarceness. But it acquired this meaning because its original sense, *dearness*, was usually a result of scarcity. That the compilers of our Prayer-Book understood it in the old meaning is evident from the antitheses employed in the two prayers, "In the time of dearth and famine," and in the corresponding Thanksgiving, "Grant that the scarcity and *dearth* which we do now most justly suffer . . . be mercifully turned into *cheapness* and plenty." "O God . . . Who . . . didst . . . turn great scarcity and *dearth* into plenty and *cheapness*." "O most merciful Father Who . . . has turned our *dearth* and scarcity into *cheapness* and plenty."

We mentioned above some words on whose meaning the process of deterioration has been at work. There are others whose history happily shows the opposite tendency. *Let*, already noticed, is one. "Careful"—"Be careful for nothing" (Epistle, Fourth Sunday in Advent)—is another.

In the passage before us it is equivalent to "be not over-anxious." Exactly the advice our Lord gave when He said (Gospel, Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity): "Take no thought for the morrow"—advice which sounds strangely to those who see in "carefulness" and "taking thought" only that prudence and forethought commended in every age. It would be well again if, in the Gospel for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity, it could be made more clear that the unjust steward was commended by his lord, not for the highest and truest wisdom we think of when "wise" is used, but because he had been "sharp" or "cute."

Mystery, a word "fetched from the very dregs of paganism" (Sanderson), has, like *humility*, been elevated by Christianity;

but its meaning seems to have dropped a little since its elevation. Ordinarily it stands, we should say, for a profound secret, something wholly unknown. In the Collect for the Third Sunday in Advent, adopted from the Epistle for the same day, and elsewhere, the emphasis is on what is revealed rather than what is hidden. It is "employed for the setting forth, the revelation of the great truths of our redemption" (Trench, "Study of Words"). It suggests something "kept secret for a time to be afterwards revealed," "something only to be known by revelation."

Much is being said and written concerning the Marriage Service. Its wording might well, perhaps, in some respects be remodelled on the lines of the Irish Revision. One word in particular has needlessly been the cause of much perplexity and some offence. "With my body I thee worship" was never intended by the framers of the service to bear our modern sense of "worship." "Worship" or "worthship" in our Early English meant "honour," a meaning very harmlessly surviving in "worshipful," and in the title of "Your Worship" addressed to the magistrate on the bench. Its proper explication, however, in the Marriage Service would have spoiled the symmetry of form of the anathema launched against it by a fervent supporter of revision in the days when the Irish Prayer-Book was undergoing the process. "Not need revision," she is reported to have cried. "Listen—'With this ring I thee wed'—necromancy! 'With my body I thee worship'—idolatry! 'With all my worldly goods I thee endow'—a lie! And all this in a Christian Service-Book."

Enough surely has now been said to show that the sphere of operations for the verbal revisers of our Book of Common Prayer is a wide one, and contains many matters worthy their best attention and care.

When revision does come, as no doubt it will, many of us, however, will miss sorely the old words we have long used, and which, so far from obscuring the sense, have been to us full of significance and thought—inspiring, bringing as they do a

breath from the past, reminding us that ours is no mushroom "form of words," but that the forms we use to-day have proved their "soundness" by the services they have rendered to successive generations. Nevertheless, we cannot doubt that our Prayer-Book will gain in intelligibility, and so, let us hope, in attractiveness and usefulness for the many.



The Generations of Shem.

(GENESIS XI. 10-26.)

BY THE REV. W. T. PILTER.

NO one can honestly believe the New Testament and not believe also that Abraham was a strictly historical person ; nor can he fail to believe that the Deluge, in which Noah and his family were saved in the ark, really occurred ; and equally must he believe that the personal names preserved to us in Genesis xi. 10-26 are those of human beings who lived during the period and in the succession stated. But we dare not affirm—rather are we called upon to deny, for reasons here to be given—that that pedigree is, or is meant to be understood as, a complete one. For (1) overwhelming external evidence, and (2) the fullest agreement therewith of the analogy of Scripture (to which there is no clear counter-evidence), constrain us to believe that many links have been purposely omitted from the line of descent recorded in the passage before us for consideration.

It is conceded that, at first sight and before comparing other genealogical passages of the Bible with it, the second part of the eleventh chapter of Genesis does appear to give us a complete bridge over the period from the chosen son of Noah to Abraham, "the father of the faithful," although the whole sum of the enumerated years is less than 300. Thus it tells us that Arphaxad was born to Shem two years after the Flood,