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## “THE PRINCIPAL SERVICE.”<sup>1</sup>

BY THE REV. W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS, D.D.

**B**Y a number of Church people during recent years the service of Holy Communion has been called “the Principal Service,” and on this account it has been urged that, in the words of a resolution of the Lower House of the Convocation of Canterbury, “no arrangements for worship should be regarded as satisfactory which do not provide for a celebration of Holy Communion as the principal Sunday service at a time when the greatest number can be expected to communicate.” To the same effect the Holy Communion has been called “the Lord’s Own Service,” and for this reason it is maintained that it ought to have precedence of all other services. These contentions involve so much that is important in regard to doctrine that they call for the most careful consideration by all “sober and conscientious sons of the Church of England.”

It is known that in the early Church, at least from the middle of the second century, the Lord’s Supper was the chief public service of the Church, though it must never be forgotten that the ancient liturgies which give various forms of this service cannot be dated earlier than the fifth century. Our Prayer Book similarly shows the prominence and importance of the Holy Communion service in the worship of the Church, and no one wishes to set aside the Holy Communion or relegate it to a place which is not warranted by the Prayer Book.

It would seem that at the Reformation, Morning Prayer was originally separated from Holy Communion by an interval, but it was not long before the service of Morning Prayer, Litany and Holy Communion were said altogether, and this continuity became the almost universal rule until recent days. The difficulty was that, while naturally providing for every aspect of worship, this blending of three separate offices made the service unduly long, and the result has been an increasing tendency to have the service of Holy

<sup>1</sup> An advance copy of an additional chapter which will appear in a new edition of *The Catholic Faith* about to be published by Longmans, Green & Co., and the Church Book Room, 82 Victoria Street, London, S.W. 1, price 1s. 6d. net.

Communion alone at an earlier hour, and then to have Morning Prayer with the Litany on some Sundays, with the omission of the Litany when the Holy Communion service is taken at mid-day. The proposal to have the Lord's Supper at an hour when the greatest number can be expected to communicate is apparently intended to refer to the time at which Morning Prayer has hitherto been taken, namely, at eleven o'clock. But there are some real difficulties in the way and one or two quite serious objections. The result would be, in many cases, the virtual omission, if not the suppression, of Morning Prayer, and thereby the large majority of people would cease to have some of the most vital elements of worship brought before them. It would mean the omission of the Psalms and also of the lessons, especially from the Old Testament, for no one could say that the portions of Scripture appointed for "Epistles and Gospels" would be an adequate substitute for the lessons read at Morning Prayer. Not only would the Old Testament be omitted altogether, except in one solitary instance, but there would be no consecutive teaching week by week.

There is a much more serious objection to the proposal which desires the Holy Communion service held at the time at which Morning Prayer is now taken. It would bring about and perhaps necessitate the attendance of many people at the Holy Communion without communicating. This practice would be entirely opposed to one of the fundamental principles of the Reformation, as set forth in our Prayer Book. Attendance without communicating is clearly opposed to Scripture, where every instance of the Lord's Supper includes participation. The same is true of the Church of England practice, for it can be shown beyond all question that our Church has always discountenanced attendance without communicating. Up to 1662 the people were exhorted to avoid remaining without participation, and the omission of this exhortation in the last revision of the Prayer Book is known to be due to the fact that the practice had died out, for the revisers of that Prayer Book spoke very definitely against any one staying without communicating. In addition to this, leading authorities at Oxford and Cambridge have shown that the practice is not only against Scripture, but is not warranted by the practice of the primitive Church, still less by anything in the Church of England. Similar views have been expressed by some of the most representative Churchmen of what

may be called the High Church school during the last half century.<sup>1</sup>

It has often been pointed out that one of the purposes of the Reformation was to "turn the Mass into a Communion," but if the proposal now discussed were to become law, it would have the precisely contrary effect of turning the Communion into the Mass, and, as such, would be against the plainest teachings of the Prayer Book and the whole history of the Church of England for nearly three hundred years. It is clear from the Rubrics in the Prayer Book service that non-communicants are to withdraw before the actual Celebration, and the natural place for this is at the close of the Church Militant Prayer.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that those who are in favour of making the Holy Communion what they call "The Principal Service" really desire to substitute for Morning Prayer a service at which only a small number of those present will communicate. But, as already seen, the essential point in our Lord's Institution of the Sacrament is the eating and drinking of the elements, and only those who actually participate have any real right to be present. The thought that presence without participation carries with it some spiritual benefit is nothing else than a re-introduction of the teaching associated with the Roman Catholic Mass, which was deliberately set aside at the Reformation, as is now seen in the Prayer Book. And so, however apparently natural and even simple may be the thought of the Lord's Supper as "The Principal Service," it cannot be overlooked that the present proposal would mean a gathering of people, many of whom would not actually communicate.

In regard to the description of the Holy Communion as "The Lord's Own Service," it has often been pointed out that, while the Lord's Supper is a Divine Institution, the service itself is no more so than any other service, because it is a matter of ecclesiastical arrangement. Thus the Epistles and Gospels are in no sense more sacred than the lessons from Scripture at Morning Prayer, and the hymns of praise in the Communion Office are in no sense different from those in the Morning and Evening Prayer. It is, therefore, really fallacious to speak of the Holy Communion as "The Lord's

<sup>1</sup> See discussions in *English Church Teaching*, p. 141; *Communion of the Laity* (Scudamore); *Two Studies in the Book of Common Prayer* (Bishop Drury); *The Principal Service* (Streatfeild); *Non-communicating Attendance* (Lias) in the *Prayer Book Dictionary*.

Own Service," because it tends to make a distinction which is unauthorized by Holy Scripture. General services of prayer and praise, the preaching and hearing of the Word, are enjoined in many parts of the Bible as the ordinary means of grace by which we may approach God at all times. But this appeal for prayer, thanksgiving, and attention to the Word of God is emphasized without any mention of the Holy Communion.

And so, whether we speak of the Holy Communion as "The Principal Service" or as "The Lord's Own Service," there is a danger of inaccuracy and misconception. The Holy Communion can be rightly regarded as the main public service of our Church for those who are spiritually qualified, but it is this, notwithstanding the precise time of observance or whether the communicants are few or many. The supreme requirement is spiritual preparation as laid down by our Catechism and Ante-Communion Service, and the question of large attendance ought never to be allowed to enter in. Even a few communicants properly prepared along the lines of repentance, faith and love, as required in our Prayer Book, would be far truer to Scripture and to the essential meaning of the Holy Communion as taught by our Church than the largest congregations of people who, for one reason or another, do not participate. Our Church is specially careful to emphasize the true Scriptural use of Holy Communion, and those who, following the Prayer Book, desire to adhere to its Scriptural teaching will have no difficulty in observing our Lord's command regularly, earnestly and heartily, whatever may be the time fixed for the Communion, or however many or few may be present to communicate.

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## STUDIES IN TEXTS.

Suggestions for Sermons from Current Literature.

BY THE REV. HARRINGTON C. LEES, M.A.

### VI. INDUSTRIAL ACCIDENTS AND COMPENSATIONS.

*Texts.*—"Whoso moveth stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood is endangered thereby" (Eccles. x. 9, R.V.). "Raise the stone, and there thou shalt find Me; cleave the wood, and I am there" ("Saying of Jesus," in the papyri).