

# Corporate Prayer.

## I.

WHAT is the place of prayer in public worship? Believing in prayer as we do, we are inclined to say that it should have the chief place, and that the church should assemble primarily to pray. We are inclined further to say that herein lies the weakness of Nonconformist worship. With us the sermon often has the pre-eminence, while the devotional part of the service is sometimes spoken of, and too often treated, as "the preliminaries." The so-called prayer meeting in the middle of the week has its sermon too. We seem to be incapable of meeting together to pray, without the indispensable preacher and the inevitable discourse. Is this as it ought to be? Do we not exalt the minister almost as much as the sacramentarian exalts the priest? People actually speak of going to church to hear a man; so that, if the man is not worth hearing they might as well stay at home. Should not the primary place in worship be given, not to preaching but to prayer?

Criticism along these lines is not uncommon, even among ourselves. But there is something to be said on the other side. One reason for the Puritan revolt against the Prayer Book is thus described in the Directory that was published by the Westminster Assembly in 1645; "Prelates and their faction have laboured to raise the estimation of it (the Prayer Book) to such a height, as if there were no other worship of God amongst us, but only the service book; to the great hindrance of the preaching of the Word, and (in some places especially of late) to the justling of it out as unnecessary, or (at best) as far inferior to the reading of Common Prayer: which was made no better than an idol by many ignorant and superstitious people, who, pleasing themselves in their presence at that service, and their lip-labour in bearing a part in it, have thereby hardened themselves in their ignorance and carelessness of saving knowledge and true piety." Here is a type of service where common prayer is everything and preaching nothing, for which the minister need have no other gifts than that of a sufficiently sonorous voice. There is no question here of people going to church to hear a man. Yet against this form of service our Puritan forefathers, men of prayer as they were, rose in revolt, and insisted on making room in public worship for the ministry of the Word.

Were they not justified in doing so? The church assembles not only to speak to God, but to hear Him speak. He speaks in many ways. Probably, to those who are accustomed to it, He speaks with peculiar distinctness in silence. But surely, for most men, He speaks best of all, in preaching. When a red-garbed acolyte in high-church worship, swings his censer, the worshippers bow in token that, through this man and his apparatus, God is responding to the cry of His people. We acknowledge no such channel of Divine communication; but we do hold that God speaks to His people through a faithful preacher of the Word. It is wrong to go to church to hear a man, but it is not wrong to go to church to hear God speaking through a man.

It would seem, therefore, that we ought to hold the balance even between prayer and preaching; and indeed, our best ministers have always done so. In their hands worship has been the gate of Heaven in an arch built upon these twin foundations.

## II.

As to what it is that the church does in corporate prayer it seems hardly sufficient to describe it simply as speaking to God. A congregation speaks to God somewhat differently from the solitary heart in private prayer.

So far as intercession is concerned, may we not think of the Sanctuary as a conference chamber in which it is our privilege, as representatives of our fellow men, to lay petitions of great importance before the King of Kings? Inasmuch as intercession is permitted at all, it means that God's rule is not despotic. He considers the views of His people. They have a share in His government, and we are persuaded that the citizens of this Heavenly democracy have wielded a great influence upon the course of events. Their upper rooms have been the signal cabins in which the points of history have often been shifted. It will be remembered that on one occasion Wilberforce lost a division in the House of Commons because some of his supporters were at the theatre, and thereby failed to record their votes. We have the privilege of recording our vote in intercession, and it is a grave matter when, for any reason, we fail to do so.

This view of the matter applies only to intercession. So far as corporate prayer as a whole is concerned, perhaps it is best regarded as the united act of a people who can say—"Unto Him who loved us . . . and hath made us . . . priests unto God." It is essentially a priestly act. As Justin Martyr says, "We are the true sacerdotal race. . . . Prayers and thanksgivings, presented by those who have the right to offer them, are the sole sacrifices which God accepts." It was the custom in his

day to reserve the great thanksgiving prayer to the second part of the service when the Lord's Supper was celebrated. It was then offered, along with the collection for the poor, as the church's sacrifice, in presence of the symbols of Christ's sacrifice for the church. It was thus, unhappily, that the Table became an altar, and the Supper the Mass. But notwithstanding the evil that has come out of good, the church was right in regarding her thank-offering as the sacrifice that is legitimately offered by the priests of the New Testament.

The pomp and pageantry of Old Testament worship is continued in that of the New, only inwardly. We robe our spirits in the beautiful garments of reverence, holiness, charity, and peace. Our concern is to have worship that is *spiritually* beautiful. We are suspicious, and not without reason, of outward ceremony. But might we not kneel at prayer without the sacrifice of any cherished principle? It is difficult to think of any other attitude that would be more in accord with the wonderful thing that the church does in corporate prayer.

### III.

We may now consider briefly the form of corporate prayer. Prayer in the churches of the New Testament was, in all likelihood, spontaneous. "Fixed forms," says Professor Peake, "apart from the Lord's Prayer, would not be so congenial in the period of the first enthusiasm." But fixed forms were not long in making their appearance. We have them in the Didache, although there is a footnote to the effect that prophets are to be allowed to give thanks in what words they please. It was at the council of Toledo in 633 that uniformity of worship was made universal and all free prayer suppressed.

The Reformation did not abolish liturgical worship. It was Puritanism that disliked the Prayer Book, and the Directory, to which reference has been made, while aiming at securing a measure of uniformity, attempted rather to supply ministers with models and materials, than to put the words of prayer into their mouths. To quote again from the preface, ". . . the Liturgy hath been a great means . . . to make and increase an idle and unedifying ministry, which contented itself with set forms made to their hands by others, without putting forth themselves to exercise the gift of prayer, with which our Lord Jesus Christ pleaseth to furnish all His servants whom He calls to that office." On this question there is room for disagreement, but not a few will maintain that the strength and excellence of devotion in our services has always been and will always be in free prayer. The present writer will never forget a service, on one of the blackest

days of the war, in the Central Hall, Westminster, when, while Dr. Young prayed—it was a great prayer—the heavens were opened and the glory of the Lord shone on sorrowing hearts. It was as if the sun had pierced the cloud. No liturgy ever made could produce such an effect. Whatever forms, therefore, we deem it wise to adopt, it will be well to keep the door on the latch for spontaneity in prayer.

It was customary, in the second century, in the prayer of intercession, to begin with silence. The silence was broken by the leader announcing, from time to time, the subjects for prayer—rulers, enemies, the persecuted, and so on—each petition being followed with an acclamation, the prayer being concluded by the whole congregation saying Amen. Happily, this same method of prayer is not uncommon in our services to-day, and might, with advantage, be more widely adopted. We might well make a better use of silence, and it would be no little gain if our people, who, it is said, have too little to do in worship, would make themselves heard, as each prayer ends, in a resonant Amen.

It will not be disputed that we preach much better than we pray, and that, without neglecting the one, we ought to devote fresh study and energy to the other. And surely the time is opportune. There is a growing eagerness for revival. When Mr. Gladstone made his great speech on the Bulgarian atrocities, to a multitude on Blackheath, there arose from the sea of faces, a murmur that swelled to a roar—"Lead us, lead us." Is there not such a cry to be heard in our churches to-day, and will not a wise leadership address itself at once to the revival and renewal of our corporate prayer?

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*Notes of an address  
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