

Experiments I Have Made.

The Morning Service.

IT has been suggested to me by the Editor that I should write something about the recent experiment which we made, primarily with a view to deepening the religious life and experience of those in fellowship with the Church. I do so with a certain amount of reluctance, not because I am unwilling, but because any such account must involve the use of the personal pronoun, but if any experiment is to be considered, it is imperative that the purpose should be definitely stated, the gains recorded, and the disadvantages, if any, be faithfully set down.

I somehow feel if we were not so much in bondage to tradition and hide-bound convention, as we are compelled to be, we should break away from many of our inherited fetters and strike out along new paths. Probably every minister contemplating some rearrangement, or slight modification of an order of service, has met with the restrained approval of some greatly honoured and beloved deacon in words such as "we have never done it in that way," or, "our people don't take very kindly to changes," and we have even heard it hinted that a suggested alteration is only "the thin end of the wedge," which simply means "as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be," whether it has any relation to modern life and its needs, or whether it be as antiquated as is candle light to electric illumination. If that is to be our attitude, then it leads to stagnation and paralysis, and we must be prepared to see a diminishing church attendance, with a consequent degeneration of spiritual life and power in our churches. Our fathers thought for themselves, and made the best arrangements they knew to meet the needs of *their* day. We claim the right to do the same, since our supreme responsibility is to apply the unchanging facts of our faith to the changing times in which we live. It surely is no disrespect to our ancestors to set their customs on one side if we feel they have served their usefulness. "The old order changeth, yielding place to new."

Then has the time arrived when we should reconsider the appointed hours for Public Worship? Is there any authority or

sanction for eleven o'clock and half-past six, other than that of convention and custom? Are these the best and most convenient hours for gathering our people together for worship? When these times were first agreed upon, they suited local conditions. Men and women had long and dreary hours to work during the week, shops were open until midnight on Saturday in the towns, and in the country there was the usual routine work to be done. So one can only presume that eleven o'clock was felt to be a good time for morning worship. But this hour is not uniform, since there are many churches whose service commences at 10.30 a.m., and others at 10.45, and for the evening 6 or even 7 p.m. is found more convenient. The principle is already in operation; the question is, is any further alteration necessary or desirable? Are we agreed that the present times are most convenient for our people to come together for worship?

The Church exists to meet the needs of Church Members and adherents, as well as the outside world, and the fact is, sad and regrettable as it may be, "our ain folk" are not present at morning worship, either because they are careless and indifferent, or because the hour is inconvenient. We are living in a new world, customs have changed, old sanctions are gone, church members *do* play tennis and golf and go hiking and motoring on the Lord's Day. Apart from what we may think to be the rightness or the wrongness of these changed habits, are we open to the charge of hauling down our flag, and are we compromising if we have an earlier morning service that these folk may attend before they go off to their games, or for their long walks? *Would* they attend if they had an opportunity? Other principles may be involved, but facts must be faced.

Further, are there not factors which make it desirable to consider the question? Domestic arrangements make it impossible for many of our women folk to get out for the morning service. If they do, it means the mid-day meal is late, and that creates problems and difficulties for those engaged in Sunday-school work. Whereas we are frequently told if the morning service were earlier it would be possible for many of these "Marthas" to attend and have adequate time to meet home duties. On the other hand, where there is a morning school, some readjustment would have to be made there.

With these thoughts in mind, I was led to make an experiment. For some time I had brooded over a plan in secret, and when I was fully convinced of what I wanted, I talked the matter over with my deacons. The proposal was heartily welcomed, and the minister encouraged to go forward with an assurance of a loyal co-operation. There was no advertisement of any kind, other than that on the preceding Sunday it was announced

a fellowship service would be held at 10 a.m. at which the Ordinance of the Lord's Supper would be observed. The ordinary service would be shortened to one hour. No one knew exactly what would happen, and there was no attempt to make anything in the nature of a "splash," but to our gratification, one hundred and fifteen were present, the majority of whom remained for the next service, which concluded at 12 o'clock. Thinking perhaps it was simply because it was a new venture, with something of novelty about it, the response having been so gratifying, after the lapse of six weeks, another service was arranged at the same hour, this time for praise and prayer. No special effort was made to rouse folk; the fact was emphasised that so many found it impossible to attend the mid-week service, and here was an opportunity for quiet waiting upon God. To our joy, one hundred and twenty-five were present. Encouraged by the response, and feeling it was something which was appreciated, another Communion Service was recently held, and this time no less than one hundred and seventy-three joined us at the Table of our Lord; and it is impossible to express in words the influence of such a service upon the work and worship of the day. Our morning congregation was considerably strengthened, and the fact that folk knew they would be home earlier than usual, I feel, contributed in no small measure to the success of the effort. Many have asked why we can't have the usual service earlier.

Whether an earlier hour would result in an increased attendance at morning worship cannot be definitely stated. It has not been tried, but this we do know, the present hour is not eminently successful. I know of an Anglican Church where the morning service is held at 9 o'clock, and my informant tells me the attendance has been doubled. I also know of a Baptist Church in Birmingham which can gather a congregation of six hundred people every Sunday afternoon, whilst the average morning attendance is less than a sixth of that number, and the evening not more than a third. No one Church, I fear, would risk the experiment of an alteration: it calls for united action, but one thing is sure—we must venture and be courageous enough to scrap methods and customs which we feel have served their day, if the Church is to count and fulfil her redemptive purpose in the world. For myself, I will countenance anything, save compromise with the truth, if by so doing we can create the Glorious Church of Apostolic dream and promise. I believe in the Church of the High Threshold, but a threshold is meant to be crossed, and if by some rearrangement or modification of our present methods we can make it easier for people to enter into His courts with thanksgiving, then why allow ourselves to be

arrested and held back by the dead hand of the past, and fettered by customs originated by those who have served their generation by the will of God, but now are fallen on sleep? We must legislate for ourselves and if the time has arrived for new legislation, then for the sake of the Kingdom, let us courageously face our responsibility.

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[The above is the third of a series of articles by different writers on "Experiments I have made."]

CANTERBURY GENERAL BAPTISTS. The documents and the premises of this church have been the subject of a careful study in the Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society, by George Eyre Evans, who began enquiring into them in 1891. The church-book of 1663-1695 is at Dr. Williams' Library. Other books, 1698-1783, and 1717-1721, were lodged with the General Assembly, and were catalogued in 1855; but they have been mislaid, with a few papers. In 1865 the chapel-keeper lit a fire with a book "too old to be good for anything," said to record some doings by early members. Sampson Kingsford persuaded the church in 1779 to begin registering births and burials; the register was placed in Government custody at 1837, and is safe, though a transcript has perished. Kingsford also compiled a history of the church, which in 1855 belonged to John Brent, a deacon, subsequently an alderman of the city: a transcript was made by W. H. Black: Mr. Evans does not know where either is to be seen. He does possess a letter of 1737 signed by 23 men, including an ancestor of Robert Browning.

Sixteen years earlier a fine Genevan Bible was bought at Dover, and rebound. Eleven years later, the refectory and garth of the Black Friars, which were owned by one of the members, were bought for a meeting-house and burial-ground. The descent of this property from the time of Queen Elizabeth has been traced, through a doctor Peter de Pierre, obviously one of the Huguenots welcomed in the city, who had been allowed to set up their looms in the crypt of the cathedral. The church flourished greatly, as was to be seen early this century by its fine Jacobean communion-table and its vessels of Sheffield plate. When Kingsford died in 1821, a handsome altar-tomb was placed over his remains. A lad then attending school in the vestry, watched 21 candidates baptized one afternoon. In the next 70 years there were 17 ministers, including a Ph.D., a D.C.L., an M.A., but none known in ordinary Baptist circles. Worship ceased about the end of the century, and in 1913 the premises were sold to a dealer in antiques for £140.