

ARTICLE III.

PARTICIPATION IN THE CONDUCT OF PUBLIC
CHURCH SERVICES BY OTHER PERSONS
THAN MINISTERS.¹

BY RALPH E. PRIME, D.C.L., LL.D., YONKERS, N. Y.

THE subject is not limited to any time or period or place. It is applicable to every time when there was what we understand as public church services, with or without forms, and includes any time when there were no ministers. It involves the whole Christian period. It therefore includes history and also observations on present lawfulness and usefulness; and for convenience, for the present paper, the use of the word "layman" includes all who are not called ministers.

How early the term "synagogue" as a gathering, or as a place of gathering, was used, no one knows. The Jewish exiles, captives in Babylon and separated from Zion and all holy places, had the synagogue and the synagogue service, and brought both with them on the return of the captives, four hundred years before the coming of the Lord; so that

¹ Attacked by one who knew nothing historically of the subject, for giving no place to the laity in sanctuary service, a minister of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America ventured to say that whenever a layman had a message the pulpit was open to him, and he instanced Robert E. Spear and J. Willis Baer. He limited it to "a message," whatever he meant by that.

The foregoing incident was the occasion for an examination of the subject, and the preparation of this paper. The abundance of historical evidence on the subject was a great surprise to the writer, and doubtless will be to the reader. It certainly seems that in the early church it heard the voice of the reader, or that of whomsoever had the cause of his Lord to plead, or would tell the story of the cross or expound the Scriptures.

when the Lord came it was an established institution. Each separate synagogue was a depository of few or many of the books or rolls of the sacred writings. In each of them, at least on the Sabbath (Matt. xii. 1-9; Luke iv. 16; Acts xv. 21), the Jews met for a public service, and the Scriptures were read (Acts xv. 21).

The synagogue service was most simple. Whatever may be claimed for a synagogue ritual must find its source in tradition and inference, and not from any historical statement. That it was open to those qualified to read or teach in its services appears from the fact that the Lord Jesus was wont to attend these services, and there to read the Scriptures, speak to the people in the service, combat the traditions of the Jews, and argue from the Scriptures his own coming and mission (Luke iv. 16, 21). The synagogue had officers, rulers, and elders; but the Lord Jesus was no Jewish rabbi, nor a scribe, nor a Levite, nor any synagogue officer. Neither was Paul a Jewish rabbi, nor a synagogue officer; and yet in Antioch of Pisidia, a traveler and a stranger, and without letters commendatory from anybody, on entering into the synagogue on a Sabbath day, he was invited to address the people (Acts xiii. 15, 16, 42, 44). Official station or recognition was not a necessary passport to participate in the public service of the Jewish synagogue.

The mission of the Lord Jesus was not to establish a church organization on earth, nor ritual, nor forms, nor rites, nor ceremonies. His work was completed and finished without either of these. His twelve disciples in his own life did not have the function or privilege of preaching centralized in themselves alone. The Lord Jesus sent out seventy others, in companies of two each, to preach the new doctrines (Luke x. 1). Who they were we do not know. Their names are

nowhere given, and their identity is not known, and they drop out of history on their return. The commission in the last verses of the Gospel according to Matthew, though mentioned there in connection with the eleven disciples, it is hard to separate from the appearance of the Lord to more than five hundred who are mentioned by Paul;¹ and, if so, the great commission was in harmony with the practice that any having gifts to teach or exhort should take part in public services.

The word "church" is an English word, of pure Teutonic and Scandinavian origin. It is not from the Latin or from the Greek. It is used in our English Bible as an equivalent for the Greek word *ἐκκλησία* which occurs one hundred and twelve times in the New Testament. Our Lord used it three times (Matt. xvi. 18; xviii. 17), and in each case it was translated by Wyclif as "church"; by Tyndale, Cranmer, and the Geneva translators as "congregation"; by the Roman Catholic translators at Rheims as "church"; and all the subsequent translators and revisers have followed the Roman Catholics and rendered it each time as "church." The same word *ἐκκλησία*, in the books of the New Testament other than the Gospels occurs one hundred and nine times. Wyclif out of the Latin Vulgate one hundred and six times renders it as "church," once as "people," and twice as "hem" (old English for "them"). Tyndale rendered it one hundred and eight times as "congregation" and once as "company." Cranmer always rendered it "congregation." The Geneva translators rendered it ninety-nine times "church," and five times "congregation," and three times "assembly." The Rheims Roman Catholics rendered it one hundred and four

¹ 1 Cor. xv. 6. It was by appointment (Mark xvi. 17). Hanna and Gelkle both regard the incident with the eleven and the five hundred as the same; hence the great commission was to all believers.

times as "church," four times as "assembly," and once as "them." The subsequent revisers of the English Bible follow the Rheims Roman Catholics, rendering it one hundred and six times as "church" and three times as "assembly." Wyclif of course out of the Latin Vulgate had to translate the Latin word *ecclesia* (a word not found in classic Latin, and when used in Pliny's letter to Trajan is used only of a Greek assembly, and it was evidently transplanted from the Greek without change into the Latin after Christianity was planted in Italy and was used afterward only in ecclesiastical Latin), but all others had the Greek *ἐκκλησία*, which never in classic times, nor in apostolic times, nor until the Christian church had assumed an organized prelatic and hierarchical form, had any spiritual or religious significance nor signified any organization for any religious purpose. It probably in early Christian times had no spiritual meaning, but simply meant an assembly.

It would be interesting and profitable and instructive to study the times and the influences which led to the Protestant following of the Roman Catholic rendering, rather than the faithful work of Tyndale, for the word "church" has grown in the centuries to have a far different meaning than is justified by the original Greek word.

The English word "church," in our English Bible since the King James version, is used of the company of believers at Jerusalem. Yet it may well be doubted if it was such an organization as we would call "church." The believers in that city had largely increased. The whole mass of them were scattered abroad by the persecution in which James became a martyr, and there is not even a suggestion in the record that they were all or any of them invested with any official authority by being set apart to any office, but they went about

preaching the word (Acts viii. 4). The twelve found so much on their hands and hearts that they had no time to serve, without faultfinding, all,—the widows, the poor, and the tables,—and proposed the appointment of seven others to that “business.” Stephen and Philip were appointed among the seven (Acts vi. 5), and were set apart to that “business”; and there is no record of any authority to preach, beyond the duty upon every one to-day who has found the Lord Jesus and been found of him. The only further record we have of Stephen and Philip is that of remarkable preachers, to one of whom came the crown of martyrdom (Acts vii. 59) for one of his sermons; while the successful mission in Samaria and the baptism of the Ethiopian are on record of the other (Acts vii. 35, 37).

We have said that the Lord Jesus did not establish a church. The sacred record fails to show that the disciples or apostles so did. There never was but one true religion, and in all time but one church. The church began with our first parents, when sin entered, and the promise came that the seed of the woman should bruise the head of the serpent. All the saved before the Christ came looked forward, with faith, to him. The Lord said, “Abraham saw my day and was glad.” All the saved since have looked backward, with faith, to the Christ. The sacrifices and ceremonies all pointing to the Lamb of God ceased when he became the once-for-all sacrifice, but the religion, the church, continued and will continue the same forever.

The record of Paul and Silas and Barnabas and Mark and Luke makes clear that they in all their journeys first went to the existing synagogue, and, exercising the same privilege accorded to any one who desired to speak, so did, telling the story of the Lord Jesus and the so-called “new doctrines”;

and when their teachings were received no change took place, but the accustomed synagogue service continued, supplemented by the new teaching,¹ and the Christian congregations in Palestine were for long time called synagogues.² Where the new teaching was rejected, they formed new assemblies (the word is *ἐκκλησία*, translated, fourteen hundred years later, with the word "church" and sometimes with the word "congregation"), and appointed for them "elders" (Acts xiii. 1; xiv. 23). This was the same office which had existed in the synagogue, and there were no ecclesiastical officers of the synagogue, no clergy, no priests, — all were laymen. The advent of the Christian synagogue did not work a change in that respect. It can hardly be said that such was the establishment of what we call a church.

The church at Antioch in Syria was founded by unnamed believers (no doubt some of those who had been scattered abroad by the persecution), and it came as a surprise to the apostles, who sent Barnabas to inspect (Acts xi. 22). The end of the inspection resulted in a discussion on doctrine in Jerusalem, in which even the apostles were worsted (Acts xv. 4, 5, 28, 29; Gal. ii. 11). There is no authority for crediting those who were first called "Christians" to any but the work of laymen.

The church at Rome was probably not planted by any of the apostles. The apostles did not precede or accompany the believer as he obeyed the great commission.

There is no Leviticus written in the New Testament, nor any apostolic constitutions, nor any law of organization, nor any book of order or directory of worship, nor any order of

¹ Whately, *Kingdom of Christ*, p. 108; Jacob, *Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testament*, p. 101.

² Lightfoot, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Philipplians*, p. 190.

priesthood, save only the words of Peter himself, claimed by the Roman Church to have been the first bishop and pope of Rome, in his First Epistle, addressed generally to all "the elect" in four different provinces of the Roman Empire, in which he tells them that they, "the elect," are a "holy priesthood."

Practically all church historians and writers state that the synagogue service of those days was simple, and consisted of prayer, praise, reading of lessons from the Scriptures, and exhortation or preaching: and participation in either the reading or the speaking was not limited to any officer or especially appointed person.¹

The Lord Jesus is recorded as having engaged in prayer, in praise, and in preaching. No other religious exercise is recorded of him, save only his institution of the Holy Supper. He, of course, knew of the events of the future, and yet gave no word of direction other than to "disciple all nations." Had it been of moment that there should have been forms and ceremonies and rites and offices and officers, and limitation to a class, in the spreading of his kingdom and the preaching of the word, in the centuries to follow, the Lord Jesus would have given directions, or would later have revealed it in the sacred record. But he did not do this, and there is no such record.

The simple service of the synagogue was the service of apostolic times. In those times, as before, there was no limit of participation to any officer or leader, but any one might read the Scriptures or preach. Paul (1 Cor. xiv. 26), writing to the Corinthians, recognizes the participation by five or more, and his only warning is that in each case it would be

¹ Killen, *Ancient Church*, pp. 191-194; Hurst, *Short History of the Christian Church*, p. 20.

to the edification, and be in order, to take turns, and not all talk together. And again (1 Cor. xii. 7-11), in the same one congregation he recognizes nine different gifts for use in public service, in nine different persons. Surely they were not all officers, and the record does not show that any were officers, and many, if not all, were and must have been strictly laymen, and the exercising of these gifts was in the public congregation. And the same apostle, in the same relation, requires that in the churches of the saints the women should keep silence (1 Cor. xiv. 33, 34), but nowhere so speaks of men so doing or of any limitation among men. The only prohibition mentioned in the record is against women and not against men.

It is said by some writers that "it is unreasonable to speak of lay preaching in the Apostolic age, as if there was any other kind."

Preaching and sermons, as of to-day, were utterly unknown in the apostolic age, and their usefulness to-day in the style of some to-day may very well be doubted. In those times it was exhortation and teaching only. We have the record of several of Paul's sermons. Every one of them is a relation of his experience, save only his sermon on Mars Hill in Athens, and his reason for digression there from the style and habit is evident.

Lay preaching was recognized in the second century.¹ In the Apostolic Constitutions, and where it is claimed to be by direction of St. Paul, lay teaching is advised and commanded.² Origen when a layman was a preacher, and his work as such was called to account by two bishops, and his

¹ Hatch, *Organization of the Early Christian Churches* (7th Ed.).

² "He that teacheth, although he be one of the laity, yet, if he be skilled in the word and grave in his manner, let him teach." (Apos. Cons. viii. 32.)

act was defended successfully.¹ Augustine recognized it.² Chrysostom defended it.³ Justin Martyr in his First Apology records its practice.⁴ The second epistle of Clement was a sermon of a layman preached at Rome, and was never after for two hundred years called an epistle.⁵

In the time of Leo the Great, in the seventh century, it was for a time prohibited, from which it follows that the practice of lay preaching must have existed. But later, and in the thirteenth century, in the Roman Catholic Church arose the Dominican and Franciscan orders, who were called the Preaching Friars. They were orders of laymen, not priests nor ecclesiastics of any name, but called "friars" because they were laymen and not priests, and not to be called "fathers." Their mission was to revive lay preaching in their church.

The lapse from gospel preaching to essays and oratory and hortatory discourses manifested itself in places in the time of Chrysostom.⁶ Some of these were accompanied by applause, and both the kind of discourse and the applause were reprobated by him.

In the time of Charlemagne, preaching became homiletical, and patterns for such were set forth, and the modern sermon came into use. The pulpit, in fact, was unknown until the thirteenth century.⁷

¹ "There [In Cæsarea, Palestine] he was requested by the bishops to expound the sacred Scriptures publicly in the church, although he had not yet obtained the priesthood"; and when the act was criticized by Demetrius, Alexander of Jerusalem wrote: "Indeed, wheresoever there are found those qualified to benefit the brethren, they are exhorted by the holy bishops to address the people," and he mentioned the laymen Euelpis, Paulnus, and Theodore. (Eusebius, H. E. vi. 19.)

² Augustine, Homily, chap. xviii.

³ Schaff-Herzog, p. 1289.

⁴ First Apology, chap. lxvii.

⁵ Hatch, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁶ Homily, chap. xv.

⁷ Hurst, *op. cit.*, pp. 134, 135.

Nor was it in reading the Scriptures and in preaching, only, that the laymen in apostolic times participated in the public church service. The sacraments of the New Testament were at first administered by laymen.

1. As to baptism. It is hard to show by actual instances that the sacrament was administered in fact by laymen; but where questions were raised we find evidences of the assertion of the right. Tertullian (born A.D. 145) asserted the right: "Besides these, even laymen have the right; . . . baptism, which is equally God's property, can be administered by all."¹ Jerome also says, "We know that even laymen may and frequently do baptize,"² and he states that it is done by bishops, more for honoring the episcopate than for any law.³ Philip, a layman, did baptize. Paul, an apostle, wrote that he was not sent to baptize. Luther asserted the right of the laity to baptize.

In the post-Nicene period and to and in the Dark Ages, by practice and by rule of the church, the right drifted to the clergy, then to the episcopate only, then back again to the clergy.

2. As to the Lord's Supper. It would seem that no one could dispute the lay administration, when we read Paul's criticism on the practice of the Corinthians (1 Cor. xi. 20-22). If any officer was presiding he would have come in for reproof for allowing what Paul criticizes. Justin Martyr in his First Apology describes the celebration of the Supper,⁴ and the most ultra sacerdotalist must concede that the passage may well be translated, that 'one of the brethren [a layman] presided.'⁵ Hatch claims that the passage in the Epistle of Ig-

¹ Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, chap. xvii.

² Jerome, *Dialogue Luciferiaus*, chap. ix.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Chap. lxxv.

⁵ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. i. p. 185, note 4.

natus to the Ephesians cannot but teach lay administration of the Lord's Supper.¹ And other ante-Nicene fathers record the fact beyond question of the practice of lay administration of the Lord's Supper in the early church.² I have in my possession correspondence with professors in every Presbyterian theological seminary in America; and, in answer to my question asking for any scriptural authority for limiting the celebration of sealing ordinances to the clergy, the replies are unanimous that there is no scriptural authority, save that one did cite what, to me, was, and would be to all, an utterly irrelevant passage.

I have in the mountains of Wales sat in a slate workman's cabin without any minister, and joined with the high and the low, the landowner and the mine worker, in the celebration of the Supper, in form more like the ancient practice than any churchly celebration, and to me it had far more spiritual power.

Hatch, whom I have already quoted, and he a Church of England minister and instructor in ecclesiastical history in the University of Oxford, claims, and gives proofs, that in apostolic times and in the early church, laymen preached, baptized, and celebrated the Eucharist; but that gradually the right came to church officers by preference, then to the bishop for the same reason, then opened again for the clergy; so that the layman was little by little excluded until it was all taken from him.³

Calvin, very clearly, was never ordained, but exercised all

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 118.

² Bartoli, *The Primitive Church*, p. 194; Hippolytus, *Philosophumena*; Origen, *De Oratone*; Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*. See also Tertullian, *Apology*, chap. xxxix.; *De Corona*, chap. iii. The words "seniores" and "president" have been often tortured into "bishops," as the leaning of the translator led him.

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 116-128.

the offices of the Reformed Church public services. In fact it is claimed that in the Reformed and Lutheran churches of the Reformation period it was practised and commended.¹

Luther wrote, "All Christians have the power to preach, to pray for each other, to sacrifice themselves unto the Lord."²

In these later days we have certainly drifted far away from the practice of the apostolic age. And during a shorter period we have drifted away from the practice, profession, and teaching of the Reformation times. This is more strikingly true of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches than of the other churches of the Reformation. Nor is this the only respect in which our churches are drifting back to the customs and practices and principles of the Middle Ages.

A constantly changing world is no doubt the reason why the practices of Christian worship would change; they were divinely allowed to change, and no rule laid down by the Lord or by his disciples or by the apostles. Reasons for these changes that have transpired are many; but it is to be said that they have come not by Divine authority, but by human expediency, and for other human reasons.

I have no issue at this time to maintain against those who claim that the apostles did appoint officers, but they were elders, and there were always elders in the synagogues, nor any issue with those who maintain that officers were ordained. The English word "ordain" is, however, no fair equivalent for the twelve different Greek words for which it is used as a translation in our English Bible.³ "Set up," "chosen," "appointed," "constitute," "place in position," might well have been used in many of these places, and one of these Greek words is translated "chosen" in some places, and in

¹ Schaff-Herzog, p. 1289.

² Presbyterian Prelacy, p. 6.

³ Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

others "ordained." It is not difficult to show that more is made to-day of the acts of the apostles, than by the apostles themselves.

The visible church consists of all those throughout the world who profess the true religion together with their children. So far it is Divine. In all else it is human only.

Nor have I any issue to maintain to-day against what we call the "Christian ministry." This paper does not deal with any question about them. They belong to-day to the existing church, and by reason of its development, and for good and useful ends and purposes, but only by such development, and not by any Divine order, but by Divine permission and silence, and they can stand and continue to stand, and that too with a wise restoration to all believers of their liberties as believers and of their usefulness and their opportunities for obedience to the great commission, all as in the apostolic and early church period.

I do not argue for, or advise, a resumption of *all* the freedom of the practice of the apostolic and early church period. It may be, and probably is, well, that human laws in the church, for the sake of decency and order and to prevent sacrilege, should regulate the administration of sealing ordinances. But let it be understood that all such is extra-scriptural and is purely human.

Let us see what is now the practice of some of the other churches.

1. I have sat in the great Roman Catholic Cathedral at Milan in Italy in the principal public service of the Sunday, after the mass, and heard the sermon of the day preached by a member of a monastic order, not a priest or other ecclesiastic, but a friar and a layman.

2. I have in Florence, Italy, attended the morning service in the Waldensian Church, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper at its close, when there presided at the table the minister and an elder, who some would not allow was other than a layman, though ordained, and one of the elements was administered by the elder.

3. I have in my own city attended the regular service of the Protestant Episcopal Church, where the whole service, except the parts they call the absolution and the benediction, was read by my next-door neighbor, a lawyer by profession and daily life, and not in any sense other than a layman in any church.

On two occasions, two years apart, I have worshiped on Sunday in the public church service in St. John's Church, a church of the Church of England, in Jerusalem, the Holy City, and the prayers were said and the lessons read, each time, by a layman, a physician in charge of a missionary hospital in the suburbs of that city.

Early in this year, in the City of New York, were held a series of conferences of church workers in the Protestant Episcopal Church, a school to train laymen to read the services of that church in public divine service in the sparsely settled parts of the city, where the people were not enough to support a clergyman.

At the last general convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, held in Richmond, Virginia, in October, 1908, a canon of that church was adopted, for allowing others than the clergy of that church to speak in their public church services. This was construed by some to be an opening the door for Presbyterian and other ministers, whom they reckon as laymen. I know not if any of our ministers have entered that open door, or ever been invited, but I do know of that canon's

being used to admit genuine laymen, such without question, of their own communion, to speak in the public church services of the Protestant Episcopal Church.

4. For more than fifty years my memory and observation bring to me the activity and usefulness of local preachers in the Methodist Episcopal Church, and I have known in my city a church under the care of a local preacher, and those are church members only, and laymen in every respect.

In one of the largest Methodist Episcopal churches in Baltimore, the mayor of the city, an ardent Methodist, was often called upon and offered prayer in the public church service.

In the Methodist Episcopal Church in Atlanta, Georgia, Governor and United States Senator Colquit often offered prayer in the public church service.

Lucius Q. C. Lamar, Secretary of the Interior, United States Senator, and Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, was often asked by the minister and offered prayer in the public church service.

5. I have sat in the old Barony Church in Glasgow, Scotland, at regular Sunday services, with that stern and unbending churchman Marshall Lang in the pulpit, the last man who would violate the rubric of the directory for the worship of his, the Church of Scotland. And yet, he read no Scripture that day, but the two lessons from the Scripture were read by men who sat with the people, but who, evidently arranged beforehand, left the pew at the proper time, and walked to the reading desk and read the two lessons "to edification," and I was informed that the reader was not a minister.

I sat also once in the old Scotch Church under the hill at Quebec, Canada, at Sunday service, when at prayer the whole congregation rose and turned their backs upon the leader in prayer, emphasizing the equality of all believers and repudiat-

ing ecclesiasticism and any sacerdotalism. In the Presbyterian Church in Canada by consent of any Presbytery, an unordained man, and he a layman, is allowed to administer sealing ordinances.

All this, as we have seen, is in perfect harmony with the usage of the church for the first two centuries. Is it lawful in our churches, and if lawful, is it useful?

I am wondering if the gifts of the qualified layman reader are not apt to be more "to edification" than when reading is perfunctorily done as by many? Why should not God's word be read as well in public as we require in other readings? Why should not that part of Divine worship be the best we can give? If God has given grace and talent to any believer to read better than another, why not praise God by the use of that talent? There sit in our congregations godly men, "men of God" as Paul in Second Timothy calls them, versed in the Scriptures, who have as it were eaten up the book, so that it has become part and parcel of them, and who are better able to speak or read to edification than many who stand in the desk, with the paraphernalia of appointment, trained in books but not in "*the Book*" and who do not match the man in the pew in reading to edification.

There are laymen who live so near to the Master, that their converse with him in prayer is more close and sweet and persuasive than others. The purpose of public prayer is not personal only, but to lead the devotion of others. Public prayer is an idle exercise to those whose minds and hearts are not with him who leads and voices their unuttered petitions. Inattention is sacrilege, and yet much prayer is so formal, and without consciousness of speaking to the Lord,

and also so often conscious only of being heard by mortal ears, that the formal supplicant and those he is supposed to voice, all are alike guilty.

In this age of essays, with mottoes for texts or texts only for mottoes, and discourses about politics or elections, or on the sciences or on historical characters, about all which some in the pews often know better than the speaker, and performances to please and entertain for the hour only, and forgotten as we pass over the threshold, or remembered only for the talents and accomplishments and oratory of the speaker, and not for any message of life or death for the hearer, there are more than a few in the great church who live so near and with the Lord and have heard so much of him and from him, and who live not on bread alone but on every word of God, that the mere running over of their full cups of spiritual knowledge and experience, will do more to make better lives in the hearers than a lifetime of the pulpit entertainment of these present days. The entertainment may draw and hold for the hour, but the spiritual is not in it. The soul is satisfied only with its natural food, the word of God. The church is not without its godly laymen, who have been feeding their souls with it, and their message to hungry humanity will be the satisfying food of the soul.

The advertisement of mottoes or the subject of sermons is a mere substitute for the Lord himself as the magnet. He said, "If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me." It would seem that some have lost faith in that promise, and sought and found not Him, but a substitute in newspaper publicity. How much better to call upon the lay brother to pour out the love of the Lord Jesus for dying men, and tell of human helplessness, as Paul was wont to do, out of personal experience.

A search of the directories of worship of the churches that have such (all man-made) has failed to disclose any inhibition of the use of the talents of laymen in the public church services, save only that, in one of them, it is said that the apostolic benediction is to be pronounced by the minister only. and that does not count nowadays where that particular form of benediction has gone out of use; and in another it is said that the prayer after the sermon is to be offered by the minister, the logic of which two exceptional statements, as they bear upon who may take part in the other parts, is apparent without stating.