

## ART. IV.—FAMILY PRAYER.

IT has been said by a great divine that God provided for the natural wants of man before He expected any worship from him. But no sooner do we read in Holy Scripture of the earth bringing forth fruit than we read of Cain and Abel offering of their substance to the Lord. These offerings, differing in character, constituted an act of worship, and were accompanied, doubtlessly, by prayer, for wherever sacrifice is offered prayer is implied.

Further on we read that Enoch "walked with God," and the same words are applied to Noah before the Flood. And immediately after the Flood we are told that Noah built an "altar unto the Lord," and offered costly sacrifices "of every clean beast and every clean fowl." This is, perhaps, the first and most distinct record of family worship found in the Old Testament.

Later on we find Abraham, the father of the faithful, after his call, building an altar unto the Lord wherever he pitched his tent; and Isaac and Jacob followed in his footsteps. These altars were rough and unadorned, and outside the tent, under the canopy of heaven. Abraham's worship was not only family worship, but it was the worship of the whole Church, for Abraham and his household were the Church. But what we regard as family worship became eventually tribal, or national, because the sacrifices were costly. When we pass on from the patriarchs to Joshua, Samuel, David, and the prophets, we still get an occasional glimpse of the religious character of the family life, though the sacrifices were of a public character, offered at the place where God had appointed to put His name there, to be the centre of unity as well as of worship.<sup>1</sup>

Passing from the Jewish to the Christian Church, we find the practice of family worship sanctioned and encouraged in the most definite manner by our blessed Saviour Himself, who said: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." The early Church laid hold of this promise with a strong grasp. The Apostles had discovered that the secret of our Saviour's power among men was His power with God in prayer. For no sooner do they return from the scene of the Ascension than we find them assembled in the upper room, and "all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication." And when the Hellenistic Jews complained of the treatment of the poorer widows, the Apostles appointed seven men "full of the Holy

<sup>1</sup> Deut. xii. 11.

Ghost and wisdom," to attend to this matter, "but we," they said, "will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

They had no doubt appointed places where they met daily for prayer, and "breaking bread—*κλώντες τε κατ δίκον αρτον*—at home"—probably the upper room. But this laudable practice, born in the flush of the converts' first enthusiasm, was as impracticable as having "all things common," and the "first day of the week" becomes soon pre-eminently the day for public worship. But it may be safely assumed that those (like Cornelius the Gentile) who had always practised daily prayer, at fixed hours, under the old, were not likely to abandon it under the new, dispensation.

But the first day of the week—"the Lord's day," St. John calls it—was specially set apart to give instruction, to celebrate the Holy Eucharist (the New Testament knows nothing of the word "sacrament"), and to bear public testimony to the resurrection—the kernel of their creed. But we may safely say that Sunday worship is *not* sufficient. True, we are provided in the Prayer-Book with a form of "Prayer daily throughout the year;" but ninety per cent. of our churches are closed except on Sunday, and possibly one service a week, followed by the indispensable sermon, often preached by a man who has to preach three sermons on Sunday. And the people love to have it so! A Welsh clergyman recently conferred with his people about keeping the church open for daily prayer, but they unanimously went against him. The following Sunday his text was, "Two men went up into the temple to pray"; and after a pause he said: "I am glad they did not come here, they could not have got in. Temple locked!"

I should rejoice to see all the churches in the land open daily for prayer, and to hear the bells ring throughout the island, at a special hour, for daily prayer. But the practical question comes, *Will* the people, *can* the people, attend? Not *one* in a hundred *can*, and in many places where daily services are held not one in a thousand *do* attend!

#### ADVANTAGES OF DAILY FAMILY WORSHIP.

I believe family worship to be the *cradle* of the Church, and the *nursery* of national religion. It leaves an impression on the young which nothing else can. St. Timothy, St. Augustine, Bishop Patteson, and Livingstone are still, and ever will be, living witnesses of the power of prayer offered at the family altar. Family prayer is the family public worship. True, the public are not invited, neither were they always invited in the early Church. The family altar is to the

household what the Church is to the parish: it is the centre of religious light, where each one may light his lamp from the holy fire.

Not only to children, but also to servants, it is an *inestimable* privilege to live in a home which is a centre of religious life and light.

Masters have *much* to answer for their servants. We have an instance in the New Testament of a man who became a thief under Philemon but a saint under St. Paul. And I have myself known men whose servants became servants of Christ and members of His Church who had seldom darkened the church door before.

#### ITS DECLINE.

For more than twenty years I have watched and have tried to gauge the spiritual life of Wales, and have had frequent opportunities of making inquiries into the same subject in England.

The spiritual life of a country or community cannot always be measured by the number of churches and chapels. Undue rivalry in running up ecclesiastical fabrics where they are not wanted is not a sign of spiritual expansion, but of declension. Rivalry and dissension is the ruin of Dissent. The congregations which flock to these chapels from party zeal and political motives are not a true index to the inner life of the people. Neither do I think that the number of communicants marshalled up for Easter is a good criterion of the higher life of the Church. I should rather take the weekly or monthly average, and face the appalling disparity in numbers when compared with Easter, as a *real* test of holy life. Better still, taking the country at large, to take family worship.

In Wales from end to end I have asked the clergy and Nonconformist ministers this question: "Do you find that most of your people have family prayers?" The answer is "No," never "Yes." In days gone by every Nonconformist deacon had family prayers daily, and the majority of the members. Exceptions were rare. At present the majority of the deacons and the great mass of the members never think of it—exceptions few.

When we turn to England we get the same reply. Churchmen who have family prayers are few—Nonconformists, I fear, fewer. The editor of a well-known periodical wrote lately to some leading Churchmen and Nonconformists on this subject, and found a general consensus of opinion that family worship was rapidly declining and falling into abeyance, especially among Nonconformists.

The Archbishop of Armagh, the Bishops of Gloucester and Ripon, are all agreed that the custom is declining. Dr. Parker

says, "It is almost *extinct*." Ian Maclaren (Dr. Watson) says, "It is on the decline." The Rev. Hugh Price Hughes says, "Family worship is declining." The editor of *Great Thoughts* (Rev. Dr. R. P. Downes) says: "I am sorry to record my strong impression, based on the experience of one who is entertained in a different house every Sunday and Monday in the year, that family worship is declining among Christian people generally." And the editor of the *British Weekly* (Dr. Nicoll) says: "The practice of family worship is very decidedly declining."

#### THE CAUSE OF DECLINE.

It is impossible to trace this neglect of family worship to *one* source. A larger number of varied forces often converge and combine in producing one result. The hurried life we lead, the multiplicity of periodicals and newspapers which find their way so quickly to the homes of the reading public, have practically dethroned the Bible as the family Book, and when the laity have ceased to read the Bible they will cease to listen to sermons, of which many are already weary, and walk out in some churches after the anthem; and soon, I fear, they will cease to attend Divine worship. The clergy have much more to fear from *ignorance* than from education. "Ignorance is the curse of God," says the great English poet, and ignorance of God's *Word* our Saviour Himself declared to be the parent of the *blindest* error.

But in all the replies I have seen, not *one* has dwelt on the misleading ideas abroad with regard to *extempore prayer*. In Wales, Scotland, and to a great extent in England, there is a prevalent belief that family prayers are of no avail unless the head of the family pours out his supplications before God as he is prompted by the Holy Spirit under the impulse of the moment.

This puritan idea the leading divines of the Reformation and post-Reformation had to face. Hooker vigorously opposed the attempt to introduce extempore prayer into the public services of the Church, saying: "The manifold confusions which they fall into where every man's private spirit and gift is the only bishop that ordaineth him to this ministry; the irksome deformities whereby, through endless and senseless effusions of indigested prayers, they oftentimes disgrace in the most insufferable manner the worthiest part of Christian duty." Again: "If prayers were no otherwise accepted of God than being conceived always new, according to the exigence of present occasions; if it be right to judge *Him* by our own bellies, and to imagine that He doth loathe to have the self-same

supplications often iterated, even as we do to be every day fed without alteration or change of diet; if prayers be actions which ought to waste away themselves in the making . . . surely we cannot excuse Moses who gave such an occasion of scandal to the world. . . .”

I have no hesitation in saying that multitudes of good Christian men shrink from attempting family prayer because they know that only one in a hundred can offer an extempore prayer with edification, little thinking that the extempore prayer soon becomes a set form of prayer, however skilful the suppliant. Robert Flockhart, when he had been greatly impressed by a street preacher at Edinburgh, urged his father to begin family prayer. The father said: “But, Robbie, I can nae pray.” “Very well, father,” said Robbie; “just tell the Lord that, and that will do to begin.”

#### REMEDY.

Would it not be a good plan to give instruction on the subject from the pulpit, and, while in no way condemning extempore prayer, point out the advantages of set forms of prayer with responses—let us emphasize this—for public worship in the family? Even the Nonconformists begin to feel and acknowledge this; and Mr. Price Hughes recommends their people to kneel down and “say the Lord’s Prayer together, and this alone will bring blessings.”

But the most effectual way of introducing family prayer into any parish perhaps would be the plan once adopted by an incumbent of a country parish in Suffolk. He went to a farmer and asked permission to come and conduct family prayers for him. The offer was willingly accepted. The Vicar went every evening, until at last the farmer felt almost ashamed to drag the Vicar there to do what he himself ought to do, and said, “I can do it myself, sir, now quite well,” and thanked him much. Then the Vicar went on to the next, and the same process was pursued.

When he entered that parish not one farmer had, but when he left only one had not, family prayers, and that one would not let him come in!

I have known a Welsh clergyman who lodged with Nonconformists of the first water, and never darkened the church door. He knew they had no family prayers, and so he seized every opportunity of assembling them together for prayer, and Sunday evening after a hard day’s work, as a rule, was the *only* time he could find them together. The new life of the Church there dates from the advent of that clergyman into that parish.

The holy sacrifice of prayer, intercession, and thanksgiving should be offered *daily* in every Christian family. Every family should have its priest, like the eldest son among the patriarchs,<sup>1</sup> to offer this sacrifice from the altar of the heart, the high altar to which God looks. Every clergyman should not only offer it, but urge his people to offer it, and the bishops surely would not do amiss to dwell on it in their charges.

Millions of our people are scattered abroad in distant lands as sheep without a shepherd. But this movable altar is ever present, and only requires the spirit of Elijah to repair and adorn it; to *kindle* the holy fire which burns up all sinful affections, and to build up a *holy nation of priests and kings* of our God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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#### ART. V.—THE RELIGIOUS POETRY OF TENNYSON.—

*Concluded.*

“**H**E was occasionally much troubled,” writes his son, “with the intellectual problem of the apparent profusion and waste of life, and by the vast amount of sin and suffering throughout the world, for these seemed to militate against the idea of the Omnipotent and All-loving Father.

“No doubt in such moments he might possibly have been heard to say what I myself have heard him say: ‘An Omnipotent Creator who could make such a painful world is to me *sometimes* as hard to believe in, as to believe in blind matter behind everything. . . . I can almost understand some of the gnostic heresies, which only after all put the difficulty one step further back :

O me, for why is all around us here  
As if some lesser god had made the world;  
But had not force to shape it as he would,  
Till the High God behold it from beyond,  
And enter it, and make it beautiful.’

After one of these moods in the summer of 1892 he exclaimed, ‘Yet God *is* love, transcendent, all pervading! We do not get *this* faith from Nature or the world. If we look at Nature *alone*, full of perfection and imperfection, she tells us that God is disease, murder, and rapine. We get this faith from ourselves, from what is highest within us, which recognises that there is not one fruitless pang, just as there is not one lost good.’ And he would sometimes put forward the old theory

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* Blunt’s “Coincidences.”