

Some Defects in Church Reading.

ATTENTION is directed from time to time to the inferior reading which is sometimes heard in our churches, and although some improvement has, no doubt, taken place in recent years, yet very little appears to have been done officially to remedy what is complained of. It is due to King's College, London, to say that ever since about the year 1850 one of the Professorial Staff has been "Lecturer on Public Reading and Speaking"; and, although he has not always been popular with the students, nor his instructions fully appreciated by them at the time as they should have been, yet it can hardly be doubted that the drilling received by candidates for Holy Orders at the college has been of great service to the Church in producing a better class of readers. At St. John's, Highbury, the late Rev. Canon Fleming—a "past-master" in the art of good reading—did a similar work for many years, a work which is doubtless still carried on. Surely, hardly anything can be more important either for the people or the future reader and preacher than that the latter should be a good reader and speaker.

But, since the Bishops discussed the subject in the Upper House of Convocation some time ago, probably something of an official character may be done, for, after all, the Bishops hold the key of the situation, as they have it within their power to refuse ordination to any man who cannot read properly.

Meanwhile it may perhaps be useful if I venture to detail some of the defects in church reading, both on the part of clergy and also of laymen who read the lessons, which I have noted in the course of a somewhat lengthened ministry. Let me say, however, that I make no claim to be an authority on this subject; but, on the principle that one may criticize the construction of a wheel and yet not be able to make one, I presume to offer some criticism (although, I trust, in no censorious spirit) of readers of whom I have heard, and to point out defects in that reading, although I may be far from perfect myself. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to judge of our own reading, and we need to say with the poet:

“ O wad some power the giftie gie us,
 To see oursel as others see us !
 It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
 And foolish notion.”

I propose in the first place to refer to some defects in style in reading, and then to some particular instances of what I conceive to be wrong pronunciation and emphasis.

I. DEFECTS OF STYLE IN CHURCH READING.

I remember hearing of someone who said that the best style of reading in church was that which called for no comment, and which neither led men to say, “ How beautifully he read the service !” nor, “ What a wretched reader !” Among the styles of reading which provoke the latter comment are the following :

There is the *rapid style*, which allows no time for thought, which rushes on without a pause, and which leaves the impression that the reader’s purpose is to get the service over as quickly as possible. Thus I have known the Litany to be read in seven minutes, and the ascription after the sermon to be so rushed that the preacher has arrived at the mention of the Third Person of the Trinity before all the congregation could get on their feet. Another instance of rapidity occurs to me—this time it was in a Bishop’s chapel, the Bishop himself being present. His chaplain simply gabbled the prayers, and commenced reading the alternative verses of the Psalms before the clergy present had completed the other verses by a few words. This rapidity is particularly objectionable in the Service for Holy Communion, and specially in the Prayer of Consecration, where, without undue pauses, one does need a little time to think. Haste here seems to border on irreverence. The recurrence of the words “ Let us pray ” affords an opportunity for self-recollection. Perhaps it was so intended, reminding us of the purpose for which we are in church, and recalling our minds from wandering thoughts. I think it would be well if a brief pause were made for this purpose, but too often it is only a hurried ejaculation, not allowing a moment for the worshippers to put themselves in the right attitude for earnest prayer.

The *dull, monotonous style*, which reads the Bible and the Prayers as though they were of academical rather than of vital moment,

is most certainly to be eschewed. It may be, as some assert, that the habit of monotoning or intoning the prayers has led to this; but it is not confined to such as adopt this practice.

But if a monotonous, cold, and unconcerned style of reading is to be deprecated, certainly what I may call the *over-emotional style* is to be avoided. I have vivid recollections of a lay-reader who, in the pathetic appeal of Esau to Isaac, and in David's laments over Absalom, and Saul and Jonathan, completely let himself go, and one could only imagine tears running down the reader's cheeks!

A further defective style is what I may call the *variable style*, which in seeking to avoid the Charybdis of monotony wrecks itself on the Scylla of variety of tone and emphasis. As an example of this I may specify the way in which I have sometimes heard read the following sentence from the Church Militant prayer, "All them who in this transitory life are in trouble, *sorrow*, *NEED*, sickness," each class being specified with a different emphasis.

Another objectionable style of reading is what, in the descriptive language of a hearer made to me, may be called the *jerky style*; by which I mean the splitting up of sentences into groups of a few words, without regard to punctuation, and jerking them out one after another. This is bad enough in the prayers which are familiar to the people, but in preaching it is intolerable, and, especially in the case of uneducated people, renders it difficult to follow and understand. As an example of the jerky style, I may instance the way in which a curate of mine (who is no longer alive) read Psalm lxii. 11, "God hath spoken once and twice—I have also heard the same"; and gave out a well-known hymn, reading the last line thus: "And moons shall wax—and wane no more." The idea of an ever-increasing moon, getting bigger and bigger and never waning, was almost too much for the congregation!

A final objectionable style may be termed the *slovenly, unfinished style*. The late Dean Alford, in "The Plea for the Queen's English," called this "clipping the King's English." I may illustrate his style by referring to the practice of failing to enunciate every syllable, and of slurring over certain words, especially final consonants. I can recall the following among other examples of this careless reading :

“Our Father w'chart in heaven.” “Th' may please Thee” (omitting “That it”). “That those evils—be bro' to naugh'” (instead of “brought to naught”). “Le' us pray for the whole state o' Christ's Church militan' here in ear'.” “The same night . . . He was betrayed” (slurring over “that”). “No manner o' work.” “Men-servan' and maid-servan'.” The clipping of the final “t” or “th” is not infrequent, and sometimes the final “g” is elided. In regard to the latter, I remember a leading clergyman, who has been dead for many years, who never sounded the “g” in “according”; it was always “accordin'.” Words ending in “cts” are a difficulty with some readers. I have not infrequently heard the “Ax of the Apostles” given out, and “all his subjex” prayed for.

A final example of slovenly reading may be noted in the way in which the “A” in “Almighty” and the “o” in “God” are occasionally pronounced—as though the former was spelled with a “w” after the “a,” and the latter as if spelled “Gawd.”

I am sure that clergy and lay-readers must alike feel that we cannot be too particular in avoiding what mars delivery; everything read in church should be so clearly enunciated, and without any mannerisms, that people should be attracted to and not repelled from church attendance. I once, however, heard a clergyman remark, “I doubt whether anyone unfamiliar with the Prayer Book would have understood what the reader said.”

I pass on now to point out—

II. SOME PARTICULAR DEFECTS OF FAULTY READING.

Perhaps the most frequent fault is to be noted in *false emphasis*. Let me specify some instances of this:

And, first, in regard to *adjectives and nouns*, I recall the following among others: “From Whom all *holy* desires, all *good* counsels, and all *just* works do proceed,” and “rule and govern Thy Holy Church in the *right* way”—as if it were possible that anything but what is holy, good, and just, could proceed from God, or that He could govern in any but the right way. “All sorts and conditions of *men*,” and “Maker of all *things*, Judge of all *men*”—as though in the first case women were excluded, and in the latter

that there was need to differentiate between God's operations as Maker and Judge.

Then *personal and demonstrative pronouns* are frequently emphasized wrongly, as in—

“As we forgive *them* that trespass against *us*.” “The Lord be with *you*.” “That they may truly please *Thee*, pour upon *them* the continual dew of Thy blessing.” “Make their supplications unto *Thee*.” “And in the old time before *them*.”

This false emphasis is particularly objectionable in the Office of Holy Communion, where nothing should be allowed to disturb the minds of the worshippers; and it certainly is a disturbing element to have the changes rung upon *you* and *Him* and *Me*, as in the Absolution and the Comfortable Words—

“All them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto *Him*; have mercy upon *you*.” “Hear what comfortable words . . . unto all that truly turn to *Him*.” “Come unto *Me*, and I will refresh *you*.”

All are familiar with the old “chestnut”: “And he spake unto his sons, saying, Saddle me the ass; and they saddled *him*.” But I have more than once heard an equally amusing error in emphasis from the New Testament (St. John ii. 6, 7): “And there were set there six waterpots of stone . . . containing two or three firkins apiece. Jesus saith unto *them*, Fill the waterpots with water.” Another example may be given from the Collect for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity, which I have heard read, “may cheerfully accomplish those things that *Thou* wouldest have done.” Here the emphasis on “*Thou*” suggests, surely, that we should do what God failed to accomplish, instead of what He wishes us to do. On the other hand, there are instances where “*that*” is demonstrative and requires emphasis, as in Dan. vi. 13—“*that* Daniel.”

How often we hear even those who otherwise are good readers emphasizing *conjunctions*—as in, “*For* the means of grace, and *for* the hope of glory.” “As may be most expedient *for* them.”

Adverbs also sometimes suffer—as in, “We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs *under* Thy Table”; which seems to convey the impression that we *are* worthy to gather the crumbs which may be *on* the Table.

Of false emphasis on *verbs* I only give one or two examples: "All who profess and *call* themselves Christians." After the *Sursum Corda* it is somewhat distressing to hear the response, "It *is* very meet, right, and our bounden duty."

Then some readers emphasize the expletive "do" (now quite archaic) in the Litany and Church Militant prayer: "Such as *do* stand." "All they that *do* confess Thy Holy Name."

But I wish particularly to refer to the emphasis which is sometimes placed on the future tenses of verbs, as in the Gospel for the Third Sunday after Easter (St. John xvi. 16 *et seq.*), which is often read thus: "A little while, and ye shall not see Me; and again, a little while, and ye *shall* see Me" (*et seq.*). The R.V. renders the verse: "A little while, and ye behold Me no more; and again a little while, and ye shall see Me." The first clause is in the present tense, and the latter in the future tense, in the original. It seems to me that only where what answers to our auxiliary verb is employed ought emphasis to be given to "shall," and not where the future tense only is used.

A somewhat kindred illustration of false emphasis occurs to me in the Epistle for the Sunday after Christmas, which I have frequently heard read: "because ye *are* sons . . ." (Gal. iv. 6). There is nothing in the original to warrant this emphasis; rather should "sons" receive a slight emphasis than the verb. Another example is presented by the rendering of "He that loveth not his brother whom he *hath* seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" Surely the emphasis should be on "seen," rather than on the auxiliary verb, it being in the original only a matter of tense.

This is undoubtedly a somewhat long catalogue of faults of emphasis; but it might be extended. The remedy for faults of this nature is surely to be found in the adoption of the practice of reading the appointed lessons over in the original before reading them in the public services of the Church.

I pass on to note a few more errors in good reading—some from want of knowledge of the original language, some from want of thought. Of the former class is the following, made not by a clerical reader, but by a layman who had a mistaken idea of the

meaning of the word "evidently" in Acts x. 3, and read it thus, putting in a comma after "vision": "He saw in a vision, evidently about the ninth hour of the day." We have the same word in the A.V. of Gal. iii. 1: "Before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been *evidently* set forth," where there is a different word in the Greek, which the R.V. translates "openly," as in the former case. A comma should appear in Acts x. 3 after "evidently," as in R.V.

Prefixes are not seldom emphasized—as in, "*Pronounce . . . the absolution and remission of their sins.*" "That we, being regenerate." "*Prevent us.*" "Perfect *remission and forgiveness.*" In all these cases the prefix should receive no more emphasis than it does in "resurrection," "repentance," "remembrance," etc.

Akin to this is the emphasis sometimes placed on, "The *Forgiveness of sins.*" "*Forgive us our trespasses.*" "To *forgive us our sins.*"

Another instance may be noted. The word "endeavour" is often, I imagine, treated in its modern sense of making an effort, perhaps with small hope of succeeding; whereas in Elizabethan days it was used with a reflexive pronoun, and meant, as the late Archbishop Trench points out in a quotation from F. D. Maurice, "all possible *tension*, the highest energy that could be directed to an object."¹ But in the Collect of the Second Sunday after Easter one frequently hears it read with the emphasis on "ourselves": "And also daily endeavour *ourselves* to follow the steps of His Most holy life." To "endeavour oneself" meant, when our Authorized Version was published, "giving all diligence," without any thought of failure, and should be emphasized rather than "ourselves."

When we come to the pronunciation of *proper names* we are on more debatable grounds. Without wishing to be pedantic, I cannot but think that here again the nearer we can keep to the original, the better. If, for example, we keep to the old-fashioned pronunciation of "Deuterōnomy," we fail to give the meaning of its title as the "second publication of the Law." Surely it ought to be "Deutero'nomy."

¹ Trench, "Synonyms of the New Testament," p. 17.

I venture to think also that the initial letter of the names Chilion, Cephas, and Cedron (which in 2 Sam. xv. 23 is called "Kidron") should have the hard sound. If "Abednego" is pronounced according to the old style, we lose sight of its meaning—"the servant of Nego." It should therefore be "Abed-nēgo." So it is also with "Barabbas," which, meaning "the son of Abbas," ought surely to be pronounced "Bar-Abbas." But how should "Mary Magdalene" be sounded? In St. Paul's Salutations in Rom. xvi. 9, we have "Salute Urbane," which seems to be a parallel case. In the R.V. it is printed "Urban," and Professor Ball, in his "Light from the East," says it should be pronounced "Urban." If so, it seems to me that the final "e" in "Magdalene" should be silent. In support of this view, it may be recalled that Oxford has a college dedicated to the "Magdalen," and that we do not speak of a certain class of women as "Magdalenes," nor the institutions where they are trained in the paths of virtue as "Magdalenē Hospitals." Yet in the public reading of the Gospels we frequently hear of "Mary Magdalenē."

I suppose one of the best tests both of accurate knowledge of the Greek text and of reading capabilities would be to put a man on to read the last chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. The late Dean Alford, in his "Plea for the Queen's English," already referred to, wrote: "When I hear a man flounder among St. Paul's Salutations, calling half of them wrongly, I know that that man does not know his Bible"; and the Dean proceeds to refer to certain of the names in those Salutations which are frequently mispronounced, as "Aristōbulus" (instead of Aristobūlus); "Assyncritus" (instead of Assyncrītus); "Patrōbas" (instead of Patrōbas); "Trophīmus have I left at Milētum sick" (instead of Trophīmus and Milētum). He also cites the case of a West of England clergyman who found on his breakfast-table one Monday morning a note which said:

"Last night you said (your words did pain us),
 'Ye know the household of Stephānas.'
 Stephānas is the man we know,
 And may we hope you'll call him so?"

I have finished, although more might be said. I have expressly excluded all allusion to voice production and elocution generally.

These were altogether outside my province and my powers. My task has been the simpler one of pointing out errors of pronunciation and emphasis. These might have been increased; but I trust sufficient have been given, and that they may be found useful.

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