

# Worship and the Gospel

BY THE REV. C. W. J. BOWLES, M.A.

ON the morning of Easter Day, "while it is yet dark", ordinands and catechists in training at Melville Hall, Ibadan, Nigeria, assemble in their college chapel for prayer. Then, taking their lanterns, they go out into the streets and lanes of that great heathen city singing Easter hymns and stopping to proclaim at various places the good news of Christ's resurrection. It is no formal act of witness. They are away from the college compound a full two hours, returning at day-break to share in the Holy Communion. Those events are a symbol of the relationship between worship and the Gospel.

Something of the relationship is seen also in the observance of Good Friday. In Lagos, the capital of the same country, cathedral and churches are filled to overflowing for Morning Prayer. In some churches *Te Deum* is omitted as being too joyful, and some of the older members of the congregations wear mourning, which is a custom which is beginning to die out. In some places the hymns are of the rousing variety associated with the old style of evangelistic mission. In some homes special food is eaten, but the comparatively new observance of the more solemn and quiet Three Hours Service has not won much support. In the afternoon a crowd of many hundreds slowly assembles in the cathedral, singing similar rousing hymns and making a loud cacophony of sound until, prepared by prayer and exhortation, it streams out behind the Salvation Army band in a great procession of witness, which is so vast that oncoming traffic is forced to stop. Worship and the Gospel are thus linked on the day which commemorates our Lord's crucifixion; but while the incidents show a clear awareness of the duties of worship and evangelism they also betray, in West Africa at least, a dissatisfaction, not always conscious, with the forms of worship which the missionary movement of the Western world has provided, and also suggest a lack of understanding of the Gospel in its height and depth. To this last generalization there are notable, saintly exceptions. Those who come under such criticism as is implied are by no means all of them Africans.

## I

Among Christians in West Africa there is a clear awareness of the obligation of corporate worship. It is seen to be a duty, as indeed it is, and there is little of the idea which is so common in England that such worship is only of value when it is inspiring, uplifting, or otherwise helpful. "Ascribe unto the Lord worship and strength; give the Lord the honour due unto His name"—the Church in West Africa understands that and puts it into practice. Churches are regularly filled every Sunday morning, and men, women and children will walk miles in order to be present. When the Holy Communion can be administered there is the same sense of obligation, but it appeared to one visitor, who tried not to be a superficial observer, that valuable and praiseworthy though this is, understanding of the meaning of the Sacrament has not gone very far. There are still churches, many of

them hidden away in the deepest bush, where there are daily morning prayers attended by a regular but diminishing number of the faithful. At certain seasons members of almost all congregations come to present their offerings, mostly in kind, at the Communion rails, thus testifying that their basic idea of worship is one of offering.

This faithful fulfilment of obligation is very good, but it is necessary to consider what lies behind it. That there are many Christians who could justifiably claim with St. Paul "we have the mind of Christ" admits of no dispute, but there are also others who treat the forms of Christian worship in a heathen way, as a means of propitiation, seeking by them to ward off God's anger or keep Him in a favourable mood. This fact is confirmed by the way in which Christians in serious trouble or before the threat of trouble, finding Christian worship of no apparent avail, go and offer a heathen sacrifice. Others again use public worship as a charm, after the fashion of bus and lorry owners who paint for a talisman above the driving cabins of their machines words like "The Lord is a man of war" or "Have faith in God". Others again regard public worship as a means of protection against evil spirits. There is little of the courageous gratitude of Romans viii. 31-39 or of the awed confidence of the faith which can say, "God hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians ii. 9-11).

The public worship of the Christian congregation, while only a part of worship, is a necessary expression of the whole. The devotion of mind, feeling, body and will to God with the aid of forms of worship is a symbol of the dedication of every part of a man to God in the work and leisure of every day. It is both expressive and instrumental. There must be a symbolic expression of worship as there must be of the relationships of love in daily life; without the devotion of the whole self in moments of personal affection, acts of service become barren, lacking the love which is an essential part of Christian worship. Worship must also be instrumental. Expressed through rites but not followed by worship shown in righteousness of life it is sterile and still comes under the prophetic condemnation. Worship ought to be as wide as life itself.

It cannot be said that this fact has entered deeply into the consciousness of all the younger Churches. All too frequently there are instances of financial malpractice and other forms of moral corruption, though there are also great examples of saintliness. Allowance must be made for the pressure of the non-Christian environment, which is terrifying in its power to corrupt and whose insidious influence is scarcely realized by those who have spent their whole lives in a Christian country. Yet it must be said that worship has failed on the whole to enable the life of God to penetrate the lives of men much below the upper layers of consciousness. The inner springs of life appear too often to be controlled by other forces. Even the didactic side of public worship falls far short of edification, in the New Testament sense of that word. Folk-tales of non-Christian origin, elaborations of proverbs, insistent

appeals to contribute to the financial needs of the Church—these are the themes of preaching rather than the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Indeed, one Church leader affirmed that it is impossible to preach the Gospel every Sunday. Ecclesiastical discipline is concerned too exclusively with offences against the rule of monogamy ; there is little of the positive conception of that transformation of the whole social life of men which would follow on a true worship.

The Gospel which is proclaimed in church and which is the ground of worship should as a natural consequence be made known by the worshippers in their daily lives. There are examples in plenty of this happening in the life of the younger Churches. One schoolgirl in Nigeria asked the writer the question, " Why is it that if you try to make a Moslem a Christian he tries to make you a Moslem ? " Another girl in training as a teacher told how during the college holidays she had been in the practice of going to a village near her home to tell the people about Jesus Christ. There was nothing organized about these two pieces of evangelistic endeavour ; they were the spontaneous expression of a sincere and devoted worship. There are parts of the world, including certain areas of Nigeria, where the Church is pioneering out into untouched areas and thousands of adults are being baptized. There are organized evangelistic campaigns and weeks of witness. Ordinands and catechists take part in missions as an obligatory part of their training. But there is not on any wide scale the possession of pastors and congregations by the Gospel. Too much attention seems to be given to the building of bigger and yet bigger schools and to other material concerns. That there are similar failings among Christians of the Western world is no ground for refusing to investigate the causes of these limitations.

The root cause would appear to be that the forms of worship, which have been used ever since the modern missionary movement began, do not touch the worshippers at the deeper levels of their personalities. They neither convey the Gospel with persuasive effect to their imaginations nor give expression to those racial gifts and characteristics which will reach their proper fullness under the lordship of Christ. It is said by some of the most thoughtful people in West Africa, missionaries and others, that something belonging to the genius of the people is always being held down by the forms of worship to which they are accustomed. The glory and honour of the nations is not yet being brought into the city of God. Worship, however much it may formally present the Gospel, is not the mighty leaven that it ought to be in the life of men. This is not a peculiar failure of those who use set forms or employ the minimum of ceremonial. Non-liturgical worship and an abundance of Western ceremonial are equally powerless to relate worship and life by the Gospel.

The difficulty is not that the externals of worship are corrupted by heathenism, though it is reported that there are certain pastors who from time to time employ near-heathen prayers about the crops. Dancing has in the past been rigorously and universally excluded. No local music has been permitted, even when composed by Christians, although European music makes nonsense of a tonal language. The Church building has been left bare of any indigenous decoration and

is rarely designed in any local style. All furniture is imported. The situation is not as bad as this in some parts of the world, but it is sufficiently bad in most places to warrant a radical rethinking of the attitude of the whole Church overseas towards the ordering of worship. Fortunately there are signs of change. India has had its native Christian lyrics for some time. Here and there in different parts of the world experiments have been made to try to find a style of architecture which has the same power of suggestion on those who see it as the traditional styles have on those who are accustomed to them. Lagos Cathedral is being re-decorated on wise lines. A great adventure is being made with the new Cathedral at Onitsha. There is a little less than there was of the standardized wares of the ecclesiastical art-mongers of London. A setting of the versicles and responses has been composed by a Yoruba. Some village churches sing hymns, psalms and canticles to native tunes accompanied by appropriate instruments, and the American organ has gone. A little dancing is now not unknown. But the speed of change must be accelerated.

## II

With the general rejection of anything local goes a restiveness under the Book of Common Prayer and other forms of Western worship. Men and women of all ranks and ages are asking why it is that they must worship in this way and what the services mean. This is not primarily a nationalistic desire to throw over what belongs naturally to England ; it is much more a matter of not feeling spiritually at home. Yet it is precisely in these traditional services that the Gospel comes most fully into the worship, and indeed into the life, of the younger Churches. It is their main bulwark against heathenism and heresy, because " here you have an Order of Prayer, and for the reading of the Holy Scripture, much agreeable to the mind and purpose of the old Fathers ". The extensive reading of the Bible, the singing of the Gospel canticles and other ancient Christian hymns like *Te Deum* and *Gloria in excelsis*, the recitation of the Creeds, and the expression of the prayers in biblical thought and language—all these present the Church's faith to the passing generations of men even when preaching falls short of its true standard. The liturgy is preservative of the faith and shows the norm of Christian conduct. It contains all the components of a complete worship of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. However difficult and repressive for some people its services may be it is terrifying to think what the condition of the younger Churches would be like without it or services similar to it. The methods employed by West African pastors in shortening the accustomed services and their few attempts at constructing special ones indicate that there is so far little liturgical creativeness to be found. Just because of the corruptions already mentioned, a breaking away from the liturgical discipline of what the younger Churches have received from the older would mean that they would be very liable to slip their moorings in authentic Christianity and drift into errors and deficiencies of many kinds. The last state would be worse than the first. A solution awaits the raising up of a Cranmer in every country. Yet for such an event the way can be prepared.

It should be possible for careful and directed experiment to be made. Provided every form of service, however short and however much it is intended for a very particular occasion, is redolent of the Gospel, all will be well. As long as compilers and experimenters allow their thoughts and methods to be judged by it there need be no fear. Anchored in that they can be allowed much rope for trying out all manner of things. Their task is to find a form of worship which is a natural expression of the genius of the people of their own country, which stimulates the imagination, guides the affections and moves the will.

In West Africa at any rate this will only happen if Christian worship can somehow include the characteristic exuberance of the African. At the present time this finds an outlet in the singing of stirring hymns, each verse of which ends with a rousing chorus. Another more natural one is people's breaking into a dance when they come to present their offerings at the Communion rail. The many ecstatic sects are strengthened by the accession of the disaffected who leave the older established churches to gain the pre-eminence elsewhere, but their very existence is a judgment on the latter's unconcern about this element in human nature. Genuine opportunities for extempore prayer would go some way to meet the need, but it would not meet the whole of it, nor does it supply the full diet of Christian worship. Dancing in worship is an issue which no European can decide for the Christians of other continents, but one can with confidence advise a great increase in responsorial prayer, particularly where the responses can be sung to melodies composed or adapted for the purpose. The substitution of such music and of local instruments for the stilted music and strange instruments brought in by the missionaries would allow the meaning of services to touch people below the superficial levels of their minds.

Help in relating worship and evangelism would be found if people could feel naturally at home in church. The average church building in West Africa gives the immediate impression that what goes on inside it is separate from all things African and indeed from all the normal concerns of life. A truer worship of God and a fuller dedication to the Gospel is more usually to be found in the simple mud and mat churches of poor village Christians than in the more pretentious copies of things European. If churches contained local craftsmanship in wood and cloth and metal, if there were a graceful use of flowers and colour, if the robes of choirs were designed after the styles of native clothing, if roofs could be made to overhang sufficiently to keep out the direct rays of the sun and clear glass or open windows allowed worshippers to look out on the world, then the suggestion would constantly be made that the common things of daily life should be brought to God in worship and that worship and the Gospel can transform every part of life.

This is no appeal for crudeness. Hand in hand with the naturalizing of worship must go an improvement of taste. The simple and the natural can be dignified and beautiful. If one part of worship be "to quicken the imagination by the beauty of God" then the church building must be beautiful in the large and in detail; there can be no room for the slovenly, the dirty and the tawdry. Worship must be

natural, but one purpose of it is the sanctification of the natural, the perfection of nature by grace because the evil in it is purged away. In worship the conscience is cleansed by the purity of God. It is therefore an offence against God and the Gospel to say that because people are primitive, therefore the worship provided for them must be mean and ugly. In Nigeria an able, young, religious painter has been raised up by God from the depths of the bush. Not every man is a genius of that kind or any other, but all men are made in the image of God with the capacity ultimately to appreciate the whole truth about Him. It would be wrong to close any avenue along which some men might quite clearly come. There must be room, too, for the natural dignities and courtesies of local custom : if, for example, pews hinder them then the pews must be turned out. If psalms are read they should be read intelligently and not as though the saying of them were a competition to see who can read the fastest. But a catalogue of offences and suggestions for improvement could be continued indefinitely, because even a superficial observer overseas would be made aware of how much the standard of liturgical performance needs to be raised.

### III

It is the Christianizing in acts of worship of the chief concerns of men that is likely to provide the greatest immediate improvement. One of the most moving experiences which the writer had in West Africa was the Rogation Sunday procession at St. Paul's College, Awka. After the Holy Communion, in which the Gospel is so fully shown forth, the students went out to ask the blessing of God on the farm and the garden in which they worked and the spring which supplied their water ; in this symbolic way the whole of their common life was hallowed. The same service has a great appeal at the Oji River Leper Settlement. Among almost completely agricultural peoples this kind of observance is capable of considerable extension. Notably in parts of China and at Peradeniya Training Colony in Ceylon the whole of the agricultural year is sanctified and heathen customs are baptized into Christ. What is learnt through services like these can be applied in the regular services at present provided in the Prayer Book.

In all these new services some ceremonial is employed and it is almost inevitably a ceremonial which is natural to the people or rooted in their history. They love ceremonial more than the English do, but any increase of it should follow the lines of an indigenous development and not be the imposition of something utterly alien which goes back to the Middle Ages. Here the Gospel must be judge both of the new and the old. It will require great watchfulness to see that the criticism is not made of the worship in the younger Churches which was once made of the practice of the Church in England : " This our excessive multitude of ceremonies was so great, and many of them so dark, that they did more confound and darken, than declare and set forth Christ's benefits unto us ".

Even if many of these suggestions are put into practice they will be of little effect without the interpreting word of the preacher. This ought to be " the word of the truth of the Gospel ", but there is, in fact, little to substantiate the assumption of the keener spirits of the

sending Churches that the standard of preaching is higher overseas than at home. Much needs to be learnt and practised before the sermon in any country can become the part of worship in which the Gospel comes to a burning focus from which its rays spread out to the whole of worship and the whole of life.

The relations between worship and the Gospel need to be made a matter of much more urgent concern than they have been in the past if the work of the Church is to go forward. As missionaries are withdrawn from more and more of the former mission field the future of the Churches thus left on their own will depend principally on two things, the Bible and their liturgy. Church history, ancient and modern, bears testimony that the individualistic use of the Bible will not alone save the Church from heresy and spiritual decay ; it is corporate worship also, if its forms be true to the Gospel, which is preservative of the Church's authentically Christian character. The Christian fellowship is the organ of insight ; truth is to be found where Christian love is expressed.

The immediate duties are self-examination and study at every level of the Church's life. Theological colleges must put liturgical study of a practical kind, nourishment in the Gospel and training in preaching, among their priorities. Worship and evangelism must no longer be merely allowed to happen or not to happen as the case may be. The best minds among the leaders in every national Church must be encouraged to think and to plan experiments. The whole approach must be more dynamic, more creative, quickened by a great expectancy for what God is going to reveal.

## **The Wholesome Words of our Lord Jesus Christ**

BY THE REV. H. D. HOOPER, M.A.

THE translators of the Authorized Version were inspired in their choice of the adjective to govern St. Paul's comment to Timothy upon the teaching of our Saviour (1 Timothy vi. 3). In setting before the younger man the spirit of true service, the older apostle attributes the passions which split society and divide man from man—as well as the formulas which confuse material gain with godliness—to the failure of men to consent to the 'wholesome' words of our Lord.

The adjective sums up the Master's life and teaching in its unwavering purpose to make men whole ; and it deserves to figure prominently in every attempt to formulate the goal towards which the human agencies of the Christian Church are working, and to define the means employed to attain it, at least in the profession of an ecumenical outlook. For a new light is shed on wholesome doctrine precisely at the point at which the Church begins to realize her obligations to