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THE LORD'S PRAYER. DIRECTORY OR FORMULA?

I

It is an old question whether the Lord's Prayer was originally given as a directory indicating what the substance of Christian prayer ought to be or as a formula intended for invariable repetition word for word by Christian worshippers in Church. Those who believe that we have here an unreal alternative—which is certainly among the most intellectually irritating things in the realm of thought—will find little interest in the question and will be content to accept the view that the Lord's Prayer was given as both a directory and a formula. Others will realize that the practical importance of the question is two-fold: on the one hand if the Prayer be regarded exclusively as a pattern or directory for prayer in the public worship of God it cannot be appealed to by those who would question the superior value which the New Testament assigns to extempore prayer; on the other hand, if the Prayer is regarded as definitely a formula which is to be used liturgically in public worship, there is the possible danger that it may be regarded as a "Paternoster" in the Romish usage, namely, as a prayer which has efficacy solely because it is repeated so many times. In the latter case, those who are greatly enamoured of liturgical worship may assert that here we have the beginning and "raison d'être" of a Liturgy, whether optional or compulsory.

Such an assertion has actually been made by a writer when referring to the Westminster Directory for the Public worship of God. Now as is well known, that Directory "recommends" that the Lord's Prayer be used in the prayers of the Church and the Larger Catechism very cautiously says that "it may be used as a prayer, so that it be done with understanding faith, reverence and other graces necessary to the right performance of prayer" (Question 187). The preface to the Directory indicates a great antipathy to liturgical worship but it seems clear that from this "permissive use" of the

Lord's Prayer in public worship the unwarranted assertion, mentioned above, has been made, namely that "the Directory concedes the liturgical idea" (Hitchcock)—surely a strange statement even though we must admit that the Directory is referring particularly to the *Anglican* Liturgy. As to the place of the Lord's Prayer in that liturgy, Alford's comment on Matthew vi. 7. is worth noting: "what is forbidden in this verse is not *much* praying, for our Lord Himself passed whole nights in prayer; not praying in the *same words* for this He did in the very intensity of His agony at Gethsemane; but making number and length a *point of observance* and imagining that prayer will be heard not because it is the genuine expression of the desire of faith, but because it is of such a length and has been such a number of times repeated. The repetitions of Ave Marias and Paternosters in the Romish Church, as practised by the Romanists, are in *direct violation* of this precept; the number of repetitions being prescribed and the efficacy of the performance made to depend upon it. But the repetition of the Lord's Prayer in the Liturgy of *the Church of England* is not a violation of it, nor that of the Kyrie Eleison, because it is not the number of these which is the object, but each has its *appropriate place and reason* in that which is pre-eminently a reasonable service. Our Lord was denouncing a *Jewish* error. Lightfoot quotes from the rabbinical writings, "omnis qui multiplicat orationem, auditur."

II

THE LORD'S PRAYER AND THE LITURGICAL IDEA

It may be said that the "command" which is prefixed to the Lord's Prayer gives to it the force of an institution. We shall examine that claim later as also the assertion that the Prayer was itself largely composed out of existing Jewish liturgical forms. But at the moment let us assume the claim to be correct and even concede that the Prayer was actually given as a Formula for repetition in public worship. What follows? Clearly this, that the design of the Lord in giving the Prayer was not only that the disciples should know what things to pray for and have in mind the Prayer as that to which their own prayers should be reducible but that they should always repeat it, as it were, to consecrate their own prayers.

Far from this favouring the Liturgical idea it is one of the most powerful objections to it that could possibly be offered: the reader will, I think, realize that on thinking the matter over so I need not enlarge on it here. I will ask and answer the question, "Is it allowable to assume that the Lord's Prayer was meant to be used as a formula in *Christian* public worship after the Ascension of Christ?" In attempting to answer that question the liturgists betray the weakness of their case, and usually dismiss it as quite irrelevant, though as a matter of fact it is the crux of the whole question. I am well aware that the answer which I give here is an old one and that it has been scornfully dismissed by so great a scholar as Tholuck, who calls it "the highly absurd view of Moller" who, inter alia, contended that the Prayer was given to the disciples as "an Interim Prayer until the time when, by the Spirit, they should be taught to pray". Tholuck's opinion of this theory was probably coloured by his own ecclesiastical connection but that there is much more in the theory than he deigns to suggest is plain from the fact that so sagacious a scholar as Owen has an analogous one.

What was the condition and position of the disciples when the Prayer was originally given? According to Luke (who gives us what is probably the *original* form of the Prayer) Jesus went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, *as His custom was*, and He read from the book of Isaiah and then taught the people (Chapter iv, verse 16). He proclaimed the Gospel while observing the Jewish manner of worshipping God and He had not yet ascended to His Father nor had the disciples received the gift of the Spirit which He later promised would be bestowed on them while they remained in Jerusalem after His ascension. Moreover there are indications in the New Testament that the worship of the Christian Church was meant to be different from the worship of the Jewish Church, that it was to be a Church as free as her Lord desired from superfluous rites and ceremonies and set forms. "Believe me the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither in this mountain nor yet in Jerusalem . . . but a time is coming—indeed it has already come—when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John iv. 21, 23). Accordingly, the Lord's Prayer, assuming it to have been prescribed as a formula, was given for the disciples' use at that

time and was intended for their *private* devotion. The word "ye" in Matthew vi. 9 is emphatic. The Prayer occurs nowhere else in the New Testament (except in Luke and Matthew) and there is nothing to indicate that it was repeated by the Apostles when conducting public worship. It is impossible, therefore, to prove that it was meant to be carried forward into the post-Pentecostal period for use as a formula in worship. On the contrary, as the Apostles received spiritual gifts from on high markedly in addition to those already possessed by them, there was less need for them to use any set-form of prayer. The Lord's Prayer, therefore, concedes nothing to the liturgical idea.

III

THE TWO VERSIONS OF THE LORD'S PRAYER

Matthew vi. 9. Luke ii. 1.

Luke's version is regarded by many as decidedly against the view that the Prayer was used liturgically at the time the Gospels were written, while Matthew's version is said to favour the claim that it was a formula of prayer. Meyer says, "the peculiar and abridged form in Luke is a proof that the apostolic church did not use the Lord's Prayer as a form". Meyer seems right in this conclusion because, following Griesbach's first canon of textual criticism ("brevior lectio praeferenda verbosiori") Luke's version is clearly more original. Tregelles ascribes the addition of the Doxology in Matthew's version to liturgical influence. As to the possible suggestion that Luke's omissions of three clauses appearing in Matthew may be simply due to an accident, Hammond's comment is worth noticing: "it is pertinent to observe that an omission so strongly attested as this is, of three important clauses in a formulary so well known and cherished as the Lord's Prayer, is utterly inexplicable on the hypothesis that Matthew's form is the only genuine one. We can easily understand the importation of the clauses, either from another Gospel or from some well-known liturgical formula, into a less familiar and seemingly abridged form, like that of Luke; *but neither accident nor intention* can adequately account for such clear evidence as there is in favour of so large an omission if Luke's Gospel had originally contained the clauses in question."

Comparing the two versions, Professor J. A. Findlay

notes that Luke's version is in prose and that Matthew's is rhythmical and in form probably that of the primitive church liturgy. But except for a highly speculative effort by Jessop (see *Expositor*, Third Series, volumes ix and x) no one has ever "established" the existence of any "primitive church liturgy"! Principal A. J. Grieve notes that much of the Prayer is paralleled in the Old Testament and later Jewish writings, e.g. the Shemoneh-Esreh or Eighteen (benedictions), the Kaddish furnishing close parallels. He concludes that "Jesus gives it as a model and not as a formula". Alford states that there is very slender proof for the assertion that the prayer was largely taken from existing Jewish formulae and notes the paucity and generality of the parallels mentioned by Lightfoot. In considering the question as to the use of the Prayer, Tholuck, in his great commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, notes Grotius's interpretation of οὕτως as "in hunc sensum" but thinks that the words being expressly given the conclusion is inevitable that they ought to be recited, especially as where this strictness is not intended the expression will uniformly be found to be modified as perhaps by a οὕτω πως. He writes "that in the present case, however, the very words are meant to be given, is plain, partly from Luke ii. 2—ὅταν προσεύχησθε λέγετε and partly from the antithesis. Had Christ designed merely to give the *substance* of Christian prayers, this would have afforded a very indirect antithesis to the πολυλογία and βαττολογία. A direct antithesis arises only when He shows how they might in prayer be *brief in words* and yet rich in matter, and this having been His intention it behoved Him to specify the words. Wolzogen, who could not reconcile himself at all to the thought of Christ's intending here to prescribe a formula, requires that οὕτως οὖν shall not be at all understood as contrast to what goes before."

That Tholuck was somewhat unconvinced even by his own arguments seems clear from his closing comment and his reference to entirely subjective worship. "We cannot even prove what we now witness, viz., that no general assemblage of Christians can or should take place without the Lord's Prayer being said. For neither in the Acts of the Apostles, nor in any other writers prior to the *third century* do we find that it was used as a formula in divine worship." (But, say the liturgists triumphantly, *we* know better *now*—the Didache

has come to the light of day! We shall see presently the value of the Didache on this question.) “The Protestant Church adopted the Lord’s Prayer as a standing form in public worship and met with opposition solely from the Anabaptists, from a sect of eccentric Puritans and from the Quakers, parties who in general reduce the whole service to the subjective state of feeling in the congregation at the time, and consequently will not tolerate in it any permanent objective element.” One may wish that Tholuck had troubled to define for us his terms “subjective” and “objective” but perhaps it does not matter since presumably we are asked to regard Owen as an “eccentric Puritan”. Alford, conscious of the weakness of the argument in favour of regarding the Prayer as a formula, closes with a question which is decidedly difficult to answer—“If the Apostolic Church did not use the Lord’s Prayer as a form, when did its use begin which we find in every known liturgy?” Perhaps that is more a begging of the question than a simple question. Who would not expect to find the Lord’s Prayer in every known Liturgy? Liturgies are generally compiled by those who favour them and who, without troubling to examine the question from the viewpoint of the evidence, decide that the Lord’s Prayer is and was meant as a formula. I hope that continued thought on the subject of liturgical worship may render liturgists a little more conscious of the insecurity of their claims on its behalf.

IV

THE USE OF THE LORD’S PRAYER IN THE EARLY CHURCH

It is significant that the Prayer is not found nor referred to in the Acts of the Apostles or in the Epistles. No one can deny that the Apostles attended to the unity of the churches and to the “seemliness and order” of the worship, but they make no mention whatever of any liturgy nor do they suggest that any such thing is necessary for obtaining an orderly worship acceptable to God. There is little reason to suppose that *absolute* uniformity was observed in worship in all congregations: it sufficed that the essentials of worship—the institutions of Christ—were observed. The free, spontaneous worship of those times permitted only of the simplest order: ritual in the sense of elaborate rites ceremonies and the programme of the Liturgy there was none. Elaboration belongs to a much later time. The

Apostle Paul was concerned lest the Corinthians' thoughts might be perverted from their simplicity and their fidelity to Christ (II Chapter, xi. 3). Free prayer is everywhere the manner of worship and there is no shadow of a suggestion that the "ipsissima verba" of set forms were to be repeated. Jesus instructed the Twelve to preach, saying, "the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand". and they obeyed but did not thereby conclude that every sermon preached by them had necessarily to begin or end with these words. In regard to the Lord's Prayer, the late Professor J. E. MacFadyen has written: "It is not in the least probable that He intended to bind this prayer upon His disciples. He imparted a spirit, He did not impose a law—as little in prayer as in any other exercise of religion; and we cannot suppose that He prescribed a prayer. That was not His way. The prayer is a model incomparable and inimitable; and because inimitable nothing is more natural than that it should have fallen into regular use. The Didache already prescribes its repetition three times a day. But it is essentially a model: its object was to present the ideal of prayer." (*Prayers of the Bible*, page 132.) The Didache is tentatively dated about A.D. 100 but apart from the question of its authenticity, which cannot be considered here, it is admittedly a highly unreliable document so far as doctrine is concerned. Thus Jessop says that "no one could dream of claiming for it any authority as a recognized summary of Christian doctrine. . . . The curious Liturgical Fragments in the ninth and tenth chapters go some way to prove that these forms of prayer were usual and indeed well established." One wonders why he does not refer to Chapter VIII which contains the Lord's Prayer (op. cit., X, page 421). Did space permit it would be interesting to review the evidence in the writings of the ante-Nicene Christian writers but, of course, no one will attach much importance to works now recognized as not authentic but as tendentious such as the so-called "Apostolic Constitutions" and "Liturgies of Mark and James." It must suffice to say that the evidence does not warrant the opinion that the Lord's Prayer was in *constant* use during the first three centuries: it was sometimes used but the whole spirit, teaching, evidence, and example of the early authors are very definitely against liturgical worship.

V

IS THE LORD'S PRAYER A FORMULA?

Everything points to a negative answer to this question but perhaps it would be well to regard it as a formula and not merely as a directory? That is a question which will be answered differently by different types of worshippers but provided no superstitious or mechanical view of the Prayer is entertained or suggested, and provided it be repeated with reverence and not "chanted" in staccato-like fashion nor mumbled with rapid incoherence, then it may be used as a prayer as the Directory of Worship suggests and recommends. But hear James Fisher in his interesting amplified version (1835) of the Shorter Catechism, on the inexpediency of using *other* set forms of prayer.

"*Question.* May none at any rate use set forms, however sound?

"*Answer.* If set forms are sound, or agreeable to the will of God, they may be used by children, or such as are weak in knowledge, till they acquire some insight in the principles of religion, and then they ought to be laid aside and extemporary prayer practised and improved.

"*Question.* But may not they who are weak in knowledge read sound forms as their prayers to God?

"*Answer.* No; they ought to *repeat* them because the committing them to memory will tend to imprint the matter of them more deeply on the mind than the bare reading can possibly do; *besides there is not the least shadow of an example in Scripture for reading prayers to God on any account whatsoever.*

"*Question.* Why is the continued practice of set forms unwarrantable?

"*Answer.* Because the case and circumstance of the Church in general, and every member thereof in particular, is so exceeding various, that it is impossible any set form can correspond thereunto. Moreover, the continued practice of a set form, as it is encouraging to sloth, so it is an overlooking the aid of the Spirit, whose office it is to help our infirmities when 'we know not what we should pray for as we ought' (Rom. viii. 28)."

In prayer we should preserve the simplicity of the child—like spirit for "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein" (Mark x. 15). But along with that and in no way contrary to it let us remember the Apostle Paul's advice and confession, "Brethren be not children in understanding . . . in understanding be men (1 Cor. xiv. 20). When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man I put away childish things" (1 Cor. xiii. 11). An easy dependence on liturgies seems to some of us rather childish.

VI

NOTABLE COMMENTS ON THE LORD'S PRAYER

"Christ did not command the *words* to be recited but that we should take the *materials* of our prayers hence" (Grotius).

"The Son of God did not determine the *exact words* that were to be used so that from that form which He dedicated it would be unlawful to depart but rather wished so to direct and regulate our desires, that they should not wander beyond these boundaries; whence we infer that the rule of praying rightly which He has given us consists not in words but in things" (Calvin). Matthew Henry's comment is also interesting. Professor Binnie draws attention to the fact that the Doxology was probably added to the original form of the prayer after the death of the Apostles to make it serve for a complete form. "There is not the faintest trace of the Lord's Prayer having ever been employed as a fixed liturgical form in the churches of the first century" (*The Church*, page 85).

CONCLUSION

Whatever our conclusion after considering the question raised in this article, we shall all do well to pay due heed to the wise comment in regard to the controversy, which is to be found in a Theological Dictionary of 1845: "That great zeal which is to be found in some Christians either for or against it (that is, the liturgical use of the Lord's Prayer) is to be lamented as a weakness; and it will become us to do all that we can to promote on each side more moderate sentiments concerning the use of it." Amen!

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