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Preaching 11  
The Service of Worship

The Context of the Sermon

The old adage says that churchmen (i.e. Episcopalians) go to their churches to pray and worship God, but dissenters merely assemble to hear sermons! While it is to be hoped that this is a wild generalization, if not a misleading caricature of the true situation, it might be worth asking if it does not contain a measure of truth – at least in some places.

Certainly many individuals succeed in giving the impression that in their opinion the first part of the service is comparatively unimportant. It is not unknown for it to be summarily dismissed as the “preliminaries” – the prelude to the main performance. The real interest lies in the preacher and his sermon, together with its soundness, illustrations, audibility, and, in some cases, its humour. So it does not really matter at what time people come to church or, apparently, in what frame of mind because the offering of praise and prayer and the reading of the Word are only the “preliminaries” after all. Nothing betrays more revealingly a man’s poverty stricken view of God and his distorted values than this attitude.

Another telltale evidence of a subjective, man-centred approach to a service is asserting it in terms of its inspirational value. Inspirational worship has been likened to a habit-forming drug... “the more you inhale the ‘inspirational’ drug, the more ridiculous its forms must become in order to accommodate you. The fiercer also must be the competition of the druggists that purvey the inspirations.” There are many who are concerned with what they get out of the service. But who ever cares about what God gets out of the service?

A thoughtful and Biblical approach to the subject will see the sermon in the total context of the service of worship. Preaching is not done in a vacuum. While we may uphold the Reformation principle that there must be no worship without a sermon, we ought to be equally insistent that there should be no sermon without worship. The Word and worship are really one. Men were created and have been redeemed that they should glorify God and enjoy him forever. And this great truth ought to be unmistakably reflected in our whole approach to worship.

Those who conduct worship need always to set before themselves a sense of the high calling and solemn responsibility which are theirs. When a congregation is led into the presence of the Lord, when they see Him high and lifted up, and when they glimpse the King in all His beauty, a solemn awe will descend upon them, and men will know that God is in the place. That should banish all irreverence and cheapness in their approach. A service of worship should really set forth before men God’s worth, and that ought to be clearly apparent in everything which takes place. A right emphasis on simplicity and freeness in worship must always go hand in hand with dignity, orderliness and reverence.

When there is a sense of God's presence and power already in the richness of worship, the seed of the Word will fall on soil already prepared. When people's hearts have already been turned to the Lord in adoration and submission, they are in the best state of preparedness to receive the Word.

If congregations are taught the theology and purpose of worship, if the significance of each part is understood, and if they are set a high standard by those who lead the service, they will eventually reject the cheap and the tawdry, and be satisfied with nothing but the best.

And in such instruction let people be encouraged to come in good time for the service, and sit quietly to prepare their hearts. The buzz of conversation before services makes clear that many people just do not have a clue about getting ready to approach the living God in praise and prayer. They neither prepare themselves nor show consideration for others who long for quiet to do so before a service. The opening silent prayer of worshippers before the service is, in many ways, the secret atmosphere. Their hearts are tuned to great things and they draw near with the spirit of expectancy as they seek the presence of the risen Lord in the midst.

#### The Structure of the Service

No service of worship ought to be "without form and void", aimlessly meandering from one thing to another. A service which is a hotchpotch of unrelated items is surely dishonouring to God. It needs therefore to be carefully planned so that it has direction and shape. Every item must be seen to have its place and significance, for carelessness in any part will soon lower the temperature of the whole. The service will be designed both to set forth the many-sided nature of God and also aim to meet the various needs of the people. While there needs to be an overall sense of unity in a service, room must be left for ministering to the infinite variety of situations and experiences which are represented in the congregation. This will be done partly through the choice of hymns and the petitions offered in prayer so that they supplement what may be lacking in the sermon.

Essentially a service of worship involves two-way traffic – God speaks to us in the opening sentences of Scripture, the reading of the Word and later its exposition, and we respond to God in hymns and prayer. And if our worship properly reflects our theology we shall make sure that God, and not man, does have the first word.

#### The Hymns:

The hymns available to any congregation are necessarily determined by the kind of hymn-book they use. Let it be a book with a strong Trinitarian basis providing hymns to enable a congregation to worship Father, Son and Holy Spirit in their glory and in the rich variety of their works. It is crucial also to have hymns about the Scriptures, the Church of Christ – its character and needs, its ministers and ordinances – the message of the Gospel and the Christian life in its various aspects. Finally it is also highly desirable to have hymns for special occasions in the year, for marriage, family and children, and for national concerns.

The wonderful devotional treasures of the Christian Church, which have come from the pens of our greatest hymn writers and have stood the test of time, will always be well represented in any worthwhile hymn-book.

The influence of a hymn-book in the life and outlook of a church can easily be underestimated. It is not realized as much as it ought to be that frequently the theology and outlook of a congregation are moulded by the hymns they sing more than by the sermons they hear. This means that only the best ought to be available to them.

It is pity that even when a church has a good book, many hymns within it can be quite unknown. The congregation go round in circles because in practice only a limited number of hymns and tunes are in use week by week. Let the minister – perhaps with the aid of a group of singers – introduce new hymns and new tunes with varied metres regularly so that worship can be correspondingly enriched.

The quality of hymns which are sung needs careful scrutiny. It is unfortunately not difficult to find hymns which are on the level of “a jingle or jazz”, or are artificial – expressing aspirations which no one in the congregation entertains for a second – or are full of sickly sentiment and empty repetition. These things do not worry those who just like a “good sing”, but people concerned with intelligent and meaningful worship will be greatly exercised about these matters. Hymns deserve to be chosen which have a positive ministry and which promote the ends of true worship.

It is obvious that the choice of hymns is not something to be left to a few minutes before the service begins after a quick flip through the book to see what “they like” or what “goes down well here”. It is an exercise which demands a great deal of time and trouble, especially for the man in a regular pastorate.

Happy the pastor who has a good organist who enters sympathetically into his ministry and who will talk over with him the hymns and suitable tunes. A really good organist who gives a strong lead and who can interpret the hymns thoughtfully is an enormous asset to any church. Music in a service of worship is never to be a form of entertainment or to be an end in itself; rather it should be a means of grace and a blessing to those who are influenced by it.

The first and last hymns are of particular importance. Let the opening hymn be one of adoration and praise. Remembering man’s paramount duty to give to the Lord the glory which is due to His name, the first hymn should be one which celebrates the glory of God, His power in creation and providence, and His grace in redemption. How utterly inappropriate for men to rush into Gods’ presence, oblivious of the grandeur of the one to whom they speak, and from the beginning they thrust themselves on to the centre of the stage, interested only in their own needs and petty concerns. And let the last hymn be chosen to enable the congregation to express a suitable response to the message of the sermon.

### The Bible Reading

Those preachers who have believed that it is more important to hear the Word rather than words about it, have always emphasized the dominant place of the reading of the scriptures in the service. In the past some have even required church officers to close

the church doors while the Word was read, so that no late-comers could cause an interruption or distraction. Unfortunately it is a rare thing for the Bible reading to grip the congregation irresistibly, but in the hands of a few choice readers it has been a mighty experience for the congregation and a veritable sermon in itself.

If the reading is to be well done, it will have to be studied carefully beforehand so that it can be delivered in a thoughtful and meaningful way, unspoilt by slipshod diction and misplaced emphases. A well-read scripture passage will involve the manner, demeanour, tones of the voice, and the total bearing of the preacher. While help from the elocutionist is of immense value, the reading will also reflect the character of the reader himself. He will be concerned to magnify the Word in the estimation of his hearers, and long that it may be a real means of grace to them.

But which version should be used? In a context in which the tide often seems to flow in a direction that causes all modern versions to be given a blanket condemnation, it is desirable to say a few words on the other side to redress the balance. Apart from the fact that the great majority of textual scholars make it clear that modern versions represent a text which is nearer the original, these versions have an enormous advantage in their intelligibility. The Authorised Version was a marvellous translation and has been deservedly held in the highest esteem for very many years. Yet the fact has to be faced that it contains a number of words which are now quite obsolete and also many others which in 1611 were used in a substantially different sense from that which they now convey. This is a matter which ought to be of the greatest concern to those who are anxious to understand accurately and preach faithfully the Word of God. And of course, like every other translation, it can be accused of unfortunate renderings and theological inadequacies.

But some readers prefer to hear the Bible in Elizabethan English because it sounds more “reverent” to them. However, it should be remembered that the original Greek New Testament was written in koine Greek – the colloquial language of every day people – and not the ancient classical ideal. In the light of this, one scholar has commented, “The example of the Holy Spirit would encourage us to insist that every generation has its own up-to-date translation of the Bible in a contemporary living idiom.” Other people believe that all modern versions are the work of heretics and that the A.V. alone was produced by men of impeccable evangelical orthodoxy. Actually it was translated by a group of scholars who included both high churchmen and Puritans and it is interesting to discover that not everyone in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century was convinced of their theological soundness. After all, the version was condemned by some critics for “atheism and popery” and its translators were charged with “blasphemy” and being “damnable corruptors” of God’s Word! The fact is that every version has its strengths and weaknesses, and it is scarcely conceivable that any fair-minded assessment will treat any translation either to uncritical adulation or total rejection. But it might be worth mentioning that those who look in their modern translators for both orthodoxy and competence – virtues that are not always found together – could do worse than use the New International Version.

#### Public Prayer

When a preacher is sensitive to the presence of God, the devotional needs of his congregation and the situation in the world about which all Christians should have a

concern, he will obviously make sure that his will be a “well-rounded prayer”. In other words, all the basic elements of prayer will be included – adoration (a look up), confession (a look in), thanksgiving (a look back), petition (a look forward) and intercession (a look round).

However, if one prayer is to contain all these elements it is likely to be far too long, and the preacher will gradually lose the attention of his congregation as he proceeds. Hence there is a great value in having two reasonably short prayers – the first involving adoration and confession, and the second embracing the other elements, rather than one long prayer of inordinate length. George Whitefield once complained of a certain preacher – “he prayed me into a good frame of mind and if he had stopped there it would have been very well, but he prayed me out of it again by keeping on.” Whether ministers like it or not, they ought to accept that few can sustain concentration for very long, people become weary and restless, and those who have to care for children are in an even greater difficulty. Spurgeon once lamented, “Alas for those who have to listen to pastors for five and twenty minutes and then ask God to forgive their ‘short-comings’!”

When a man leads the same congregation in public worship Sunday by Sunday he needs to ensure that there is variety in his public prayers. The aspects of the character of God which he considers in worship, the matters for which he gives thanks, and the enormously varied needs of his congregation, the world-wide church of Christ, society and the nation, together with any special item of world news, will all need to be carefully thought out if monotonous repetition is to be avoided. Those who boast that they have been delivered from a liturgy because they use only free prayer can themselves quickly lapse into an unwritten liturgy of their own, with its rigid lines of phraseology and thought. The end result is what somebody has caustically called “rutualism”. James Black warns us against “grooves of thought and expressions as stereotyped as any printed thing, with this important difference, that their unconscious liturgy is often gravely imbalanced, crudely expressed and cruelly omissive”. It has also been suggested that it would be a good exercise for ministers to give a rest to that overworked word “bless” for a period, and so learn to be both more precise and less monotonous in their petitions.

One of the greatest sources of variety in public prayer will come from a closer acquaintance with the Scriptures. This does not mean the endless reciting of Biblical texts and phrases which can soon become hackneyed. But it will involve a knowledge of the devotional parts of the Bible such as will provide a tone and atmosphere for our devotions.

And how crucial it is to remember that the God whom we address is “the great God, the great king above all gods” (Psalm 95:3); He is not our next door neighbour. While the Christian enjoys the immense privilege through Christ of talking to one who is “our Father”, let it never be forgotten that He is also “in heaven”. In other words, there should be not only a simplicity and child-like trust expressed in our public worship, but also a deep reverence and godly fear. The above quotations prompt the question why there cannot be said, even occasionally, the prayer which our Lord taught His disciples. After all, it provides the only non-liturgical service for the congregation to pray together. Those who fear that the result might be “vain repetition” curiously never seem to have the same reservations about the singing of

some hymns and choruses in certain older hymn books and their modern counterparts, which, by their contents and excessive frequency of use, are full of “vain repetition”.

What about the “thou” and “you” controversy? This is surely something about which the individual minister should be left to make up his own mind. But having done so, let him stick to his decision because there is nothing more irritating to many people than to hear someone oscillating between “thou” and “you” in the prayer. But let not those who use “you” be branded as being “with it”, “gimmicky”, or “irreverent”. They are only being consistent, because the original Scriptures in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek do not use special pronouns for the persons of the Godhead. If a man is happier using “thou” he is to be respected, but he ought not to insist that this is the only way in which God can be properly addressed.

It is evident that the public prayer requires both the help and the anointing of the Holy Spirit and also the prayerful preparation of soul and mind beforehand. J.H.Jowett sternly pillories a casual attitude to public prayer when he says “If we think of prayer as one of ‘the preliminaries’ we shall treat it accordingly. We shall stumble up to it. We shall stumble through it. We shall say ‘just what comes to us’ for anything that ‘comes’ will be as good as anything else! Anything will do for a ‘preliminary’. We have prepared the words we are to speak to men but any heedless speech will suffice for our communion with God! And so our prayerful people are chilled and our prayerless people are hardened.”

Jowett’s words would seem to have a bearing on that most regrettable practice which prevails in some quarters, of lighting on some hapless brother to lead in public prayer at a second’s notice – apparently by way of acknowledging the presence of someone of some significance in the congregation. Let Spurgeon have something to say about this practice “... resist the practice of choosing men to pray with the idea of honouring them by giving them something to do. Our public devotion ought not to be degraded into opportunities for compliment.”

Finally, let us beware of two other dangers which are always present when public prayer is offered. The first is the temptation to pray in order to impress the congregation. An infamous sentence in an American newspaper years ago is alleged to have described a minister’s prayer as “the most eloquent prayer ever addressed to a Boston audience”. Let us also avoid that equally objectionable habit of offering a “horizontal prayer”, which is really an excuse to preach or “get at” somebody in the congregation.

### The Children’s Address

It is not unknown for some men to show considerable impatience with the idea of a children’s address. In their estimation it is only a time-filler or form of entertainment. Of course, if that is all they can see in it, they do well to dispense with it. But when well executed, the children’s address can make a valuable contribution to the morning service. It is important to acknowledge the place of children in the congregation and to speak to them directly for a short while. Furthermore, young Christians and others who for various reasons do not benefit from the sermon as much as could be desired, can also be helped by the talk to the children. If the second hymn can be chosen by the children and announced by one of them in turn, so much the better.

At whatever point the preacher may begin to secure the interest of the children – a story, a visual aid, a subject of interest, etc. – it is crucial that, at the end, the children are brought to God's Word and to His Son. This obviously does not mean that every children's address should be directly evangelistic; the Bible is full of things which children ought to know and do. But it is essential that, in a way in which their minds can grasp, they are made aware of some aspect of the teaching of the Scriptures, and are not merely amused or entertained for the sake of it.

The big secret in speaking to children is to look at everything through a child's eyes, to appeal to them along the line of their interests, and to use simple words and short sentences which they can understand. Watch their eyes to see if their interest is maintained, and go over the lesson by question and answer to see if it has sunk in. In talking to children it is better to say one thing in twenty different ways than to say twenty different things, for "it takes a great deal of repetition to get a big idea into a small boy's mind".

Finally it is a good thing to point out occasionally to young people the meaning and parts of the service of worship, and also to explain to them the significance of the baptistery, the Lord's Table and the pulpit (and all the better if it has a pulpit Bible in it).

### The Sermon as an Act of Worship

How often do preachers and their congregations think of the sermon and the response to it in terms of an act of worship? These ought, in fact, to be seen as the very climax of worship. True preaching involves an adoration of God by a showing forth of His attributes and a making known of His will. If Christianity is indeed the revelation of God, what else can the preaching of the Word do but lead to worship? Such a lofty conception of preaching must necessarily eliminate all that is unworthy, and deliver us from many an error. Rightly to listen to the preaching of the Word and obediently to make an appropriate response to it are likewise acts of worship.

There is a famous story about an English merchant who, 300 years ago, was recounting his experience of certain eminent preachers to whom he had listened in Scotland. He said of Robert Blair of St. Andrews – "that man showed me the majesty of God". Then a little fair man – Samuel Rutherford – "showed me the loveliness of Christ". Later, at Irvine, David Dickson – a well-favoured proper old man – "showed me all my heart". How could the supreme ends of preaching be better described?

### The Preacher himself

It is evident that not only the quality of the preaching but also the conduct of the whole service of worship depends so much upon the inner spiritual life of the minister. This is particularly so in free church worship where very often the moods, the outlook and the foibles of the man can obtrude. No wonder many find it a more difficult exercise to pray publicly than to preach.

How important it is, therefore, that the man who leads worship should live near to God, habitually practice His presence and live in the spirit of worship. If he does so,

he will be able to enter the pulpit and conduct the service with a well-prepared heart and a reverent soul. Few things betray the shallowness of our spiritual experience and the inadequacy of our private devotional life like the quality of our public ministrations. Speaking of the preacher's devotional life J.H.Jowett truly claims, "Our secret life will determine our spiritual power."