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THE PLACE OF THE BIBLE.

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A Paper read at the Conference of the Young Churchmen's
Movement at Whan Cross, May, 1936.

YESTERDAY, you gave your time to the consideration of the general situation in the Church to-day, and specially in relation to her mission of preaching the Gospel. The "Forces and Work" and the "Forces we Need" together form the field of activity in the spiritual realm in which we are concerned.

But we want more particularly to-day to turn to our own position as members of our own Church; that is, to regard the Church of England in the light of an implement for reaching the world around us, and as an organisation within the borders of which we can, and should, enjoy the fellowship of other Christians. This is in order that we may this evening be able to assess in some degree both our individual responsibilities and the opportunities which lie before us. Right from the beginning, then, I should like it to be clear that I am approaching this subject of "The Place of the Bible," which I am asked to discuss with you this morning, from the position of considering its relevance in regard to the evening session devoted to "Our Personal Part," and that, too, in the context of our position as Churchmen.

Now we are chiefly involved with two separate questions: that of the place of the Bible in the individual life and witness, and that of the attitude of our Church in this most fundamental point. If I stress the latter chiefly, it is not that the former does not occupy the chief place in one's mind, but that the natural conclusion to which I shall be drawing your attention, is that the attitude of the Church to the Bible must essentially be a reflection of the place which the Word of God has in the life of the individual Christian.

In this introduction to my subject I have deliberately chosen to use two words as descriptive of the function of the Church which are both inadequate and objectionable. They are "*implement*" and "*organisation*." There is no time for the discussion of the doctrine of the Church—as such—and it is just with those two aspects of our Church that we want to deal. But one dare not go on without defining briefly the foremost conception of the Church as an *Organism*; alive, progressive, and only so in any real sense as it is indeed the Body, united to the Head, the Lord Jesus, by the Holy Spirit of God Himself. Apart from Him all organisation, that is all use of the Church as an implement, is but a waste of otherwise perfectly good energy (one is forcibly reminded of the parody "Like a mighty engine moves the Church of God"). There is no spiritual energy apart from the Spirit of God.

I mean that, not in the sense that anything which can be described as spiritual must emanate from Him, but that He alone is the Source

of supply for our service and witness. This leads me on to the first point which I wish to present :

GOD'S WORK MUST BE DONE IN GOD'S WAY.

That is axiomatic, call it a mere statement of the obvious if you will, but it stands, clear and well defined, as a first principle for our work and for our worship.

There is stark tragedy about the "methodism" which is rampant in our midst to-day; the conferences and seeking after stunts on every hand reveal a lack of real vitality. It is a mark of spiritual bankruptcy from the point of view of the measure in which one is influencing others to be constantly trying this and that means in the hope that somehow or other we shall be able to "*compel*" a blessing from God. The movement must be the other way, indeed. As someone has well said :

"In the early church it was *the Lord* Who worked with them, rather than they merely worked for the Lord. It was *the Lord* who added to the Church daily such as were being saved, rather than 'they tried to add to the Church as many as they could get hold of by any conceivable means or methods they could possibly devise.'"

The very fact that we have taken this particular subject for this morning is evidence of the fact that it is possible to have an organisation for the service of God, which may through and through be faulty and unlikely to be of real service. But, given that we accept this aspect of the case, what are the tests that we can apply? How are we to judge?

The compilers of the syllabus for our discussion express this question in the following terms :

"Is the Church of England worth belonging to and working for? Here are some tests to apply to a Church and its worship: Is it based on the Word of God? Does it help its adherents to know and obey the Word of God? Is it helping men and women to approach and worship God in a Scriptural way?"

I am quite busy enough a person always to be glad to be told exactly what one ought to be saying at a meeting such as this, and I take these suggestions as being excellent in design—but, are they sound in principle? That seems to me to be a question that must be explored first.

In other words, why should we be giving such a peculiar emphasis to the Bible (taking it for granted that we are entitled to make the equation of the terms "The Word of God" and "the Bible")? Can it be said that we have there expressed principles which *govern* what we can consider true worship, and *define* or *exclude* things which are false? We must answer that question first, and then we are in a position to see whether or no the position adopted by the Church of England and expressed in her formularies is to be considered as that most amenable to the Mind of our Lord.

I want to get right at the root of the question here, so pardon me if a question I now ask does seem a little remote from the exact

terms of our inquiry and perhaps a little unnecessary in such a company as this. But, is it true—or is it not—that each step in the experience of a Christian is taken actually as he or she appropriates some promise of God? If so, then, clearly there can be only one answer to our asking what is to be the standard and what the means of worship.

Remember, the Word of God is living and powerful; it is the Seed sown by the Heavenly Sower; it results in the springing up of eternal life; it conditions the growth and development of that Life. "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever." "Desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby."

Assurance, Experience, Holiness, Fulness of Joy . . . all these things are the experience of the Christian as the direct and immediate effect of the reception of the Word of God. It is in this sense that Martin Luther said: "The soul can do without everything except the Word of God, without which none at all of its wants are cared for."

Now, here is my point, if that is so of the individual—what of the *organism* (mark the word)? If the life is to be kept pure and to develop, if the contagion of the living faith is to spread, then surely, accepting our first position, it is only going to be along the Way of God and we can now say,

GOD'S WAY IS THE WAY OF THE WORD OF GOD.

That is my second proposition; it leads on to the query as to the attitude of the compilers of the Prayer Book to the Bible and the use of the Bible in the liturgy for which they were responsible.

(You will allow me, I trust, for the sake of time, to confine our thoughts simply to the Prayer Book as expressing the terms of the worship—which is the reflection of the spiritual life, of our Church.)

First, then, the attitude of the Reformers. Here we can give an immediate and definite answer. In the year 1547, between the publishing of the first piece of English Liturgy, the Litany of 1544, and the Prayer Book in 1549, the First Book of Homilies was published, and the first of these entitled: *A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture*.

It was composed by Cranmer himself, and he dogmatically asserts that the Scriptures are the sole source of doctrine necessary for our justification and everlasting salvation. He draws the sermon to its conclusion with these words:

" . . . and briefly to conclude, as St. Augustin saith, by the Scripture all men be amended, weak men be strengthened, and strong men be comforted. So that surely none be enemies to the reading of God's Word, but such as be so ignorant that they know not how wholesome a thing it is; or else be so sick that they hate the most comfortable medicine that should heal them; or so ungodly, that they would wish the people still to continue in blindness and ignorance of God."

We are surely safe in concluding that one who would so preach about the Bible, would place just the same emphasis in his more

exacting and more permanent task in the compiling of a Liturgy. Perhaps it is not altogether out of place to remind ourselves, here, that it was the production of the English Bible which gave the impetus to the movement for the publishing of an English Prayer Book.

Now to branch off briefly for a glance at the position which the Bible has in the formal declarations of the faith of our Church. A study of the articles would call for more space than one can allow, but suffice it to remark one thing substantiated by two quotations :

In them the Church limits her authority in two ways : (i) her ordinances being censored by the written word of God ; (ii) the necessity in her teaching of expounding the Word of God without adding to, or taking from, statements there made.

And the quotations :

“ Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation : so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”

“ It is not lawful for the Church of God to ordain any thing that is contrary to God’s Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it may be repugnant to another.”

Let us turn now to the question of Worship ; approaching in the same manner, may we examine this as a principle ?

THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WAY FOR WORSHIP.

Worship is the expression by the individual soul of regard and reverence for God. The Scriptures themselves continuously warn against false worship ; not anywhere else can you find such strong denunciations of insincerity or wrongful conceptions. Prophet after prophet thundered against such things. Then, when we turn to the other, positive, side, we have the eternal principle expressed in our Lord’s own Words : “ They that worship Him, must worship Him in Spirit and in Truth.”

I want you to link that with the two verses which help to enter into the meaning of the words : “ Thy Word is Truth.” “ Your heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him.”

Arising then from that, I suggest to you that we should find in the Scriptures the bounds and conditions for our worship.

This is not altogether tantamount to inviting you to answer the question as to whether you consider the Apostolic Church to have been “ a diluted edition of the Church of England,” but it does mean opening our Prayer Books to the most ruthless examination in the light of Scripture to ask just how far we have New Testament sanction for the peculiar methods we employ in our services to-day.

Let me illustrate with the one point of the use of set forms of prayer.

This is a grand battle-ground, and our antagonists on this point can make rare play upon our so-called failure to allow the liberty of the Spirit in our worship. They themselves invariably enjoy such order as comes from hymns. John Newton’s lines are apt here :

Crito freely will rehearse
 Forms of Prayer and Praise in verse.
 Why should Crito then suppose
 Forms are sinful when in prose?
 Must my form be deemed a crime
 Simply from the want of rhyme?

When we turn to our Bibles, the obvious point for first reference is the account of the giving of the Lord's Prayer. We find St. Luke recording the form, "*When ye pray say . . .*," from which we infer that the Lord definitely gave the disciples here a form of prayer that they were to use. Further support may be seen in Scripture in different formulæ which recur, such as those associated with Baptism and the Institution of the Lord's Supper.

Yet, there is too a broader issue, which we find suggested by St. Matthew's form of the giving of the Lord's Prayer, where the introductory words are, "After this manner pray ye . . ." This seems to suggest the prayer as giving us a specimen which embraces all the elements that we should find in a time of prayer. The whole atmosphere of the New Testament teaching about prayer is one which in itself involves a sense of "preparedness" and certainly of "order."

The Pharisee inclined his head in the temple and prayed after his own inclination, but it was the Publican who took up the position of humble acknowledgment of his condition before God, who went down to his house justified, rather than the other.

Our Worship **MUST** bear the characteristic of being attuned to, and indeed fully based on, the Word of God.

Dr. Griffith Thomas wrote:

"We must meditate on the Word of God. The food of the Scriptures, God's Revelation of His Will, is needed to sustain prayer. The promises are to elicit prayer. The Word and prayer always go together, and no prayer is of use that is not based on, warranted by, and saturated with the Word of God."

That quotation gives me the phrase for which I have been seeking; our worship must bear the seal of being *saturated with* the Word of God. If it is so, then we have a priceless heritage and a glorious opportunity every time we enter God's House. If it is not, then—and I speak strongly to impress the point—away with all the profane and vain babbling! The book is an abomination to a Christian man!

Think just for a moment of the service in which we are about to join, Morning Prayer. It opens with the quotation of the Word of God, and immediately we hear the words, The Scripture . . . It is because the Bible calls to repentance, we are told, that we join in the General Confession. It is because God has promised forgiveness of sins that the words of absolution are declared. It is in the very words of the Bible in the Psalms that we lift our voices to praise our Father. Then we listen to the reading of the Word.

Again, I wonder if the position of the Creeds in our services has ever impressed you. It is no accident that they are found immediately after the reading of Scripture. In some ways the Creed forms the central act of the service—a loving declaration of confidence and

trust in God Himself. (I believe in God . . . I wholly and confidently commit myself to God.) The Creeds follow the reading of the truth on which they are based, and lead on in natural sequence to those requests which most naturally form themselves on the lips of children in the Presence of a Father Whom they adore. Prayer is the inevitable and logical outcome of belief in God.

Dr. Harold Smith wrote :

“ The relation of a Creed to Scripture may be compared to that of the Report of a Commission to the evidence on which this Report is based. The report is of value only so far as it is borne out by the evidence. Its value consists in its summarising the evidence, extracting the most important facts from the whole mass, marshalling and interpreting them.”

I want firmly to submit to you, with all the conviction that comes from using the Book, that in our incomparable Liturgy we have a production that is entirely consonant with and indeed saturated with the very Word of God. (It is almost like Daily Light !) In fact one heartily reciprocates the words of a clergyman who made a present of a prayer book to an old lady of definite Baptist convictions, saying, “ Well, here is a little meal for your water ! ”

The three points we have hurriedly suggested are these : God's Work must be done in God's Way ; God's Way is the Way of the Word of God ; The Word of God is the Way for Worship ; and our conclusion surely must be that in our Church and in its services we have just such an expression of worship.

As individuals you and I rejoice in the possession of an open Bible ; in the Church we have a Church of an open Bible. It is only as we see to it that this emphasis is maintained that we shall hope to be fulfilling the Plan of God for ourselves in this generation. How we are to see this achieved is for us to decide during our remaining sessions.

But perhaps one final word will not be out of place here. The Prayer Book is specifically an English Book, the organisation of our Church is one that is peculiar to our great heritage. The purpose of the Reformers in England was that we should use “ such ceremonies as thought best to the setting forth of God's honour and glory,” and their determination was that our Book should be according to the mind of the Nation. My plea then, this morning, is that you will examine your Prayer Book, see how it stands the test of the Word of God, consider it as part and parcel of the great heritage of things which have contributed to the greatness of our nation, and so be convinced once again, and from this peculiar angle of the history of this book, of the power of the living Word of God.

Spiritual Verses, by R. G. Turner (Thynne & Co., 1s. net), is a series of short poems, including Scriptural Paraphrases, Testings and Temptations and Sundry Poems. They are conceived in a deeply devotional spirit. *Metrical Family Religious Conversations*, by Francis Percival (2s. net), is issued by the same publishers. It contains a number of metrical conversations between a parent and a child on subjects of religious interest, together with other verse.