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Worship in Spirit and in Truth

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

A transcript of an address to the Islington Conference, 1954

“**E**VANGELICAL Insights within the Church”—the wording of the general subject of this conference is wisely chosen, for it means that we are not claiming a monopoly of the truth. Within the Church of England and within the whole Church of God there are others from whom we, who call ourselves Evangelicals, have much to learn, but that is no reason why we should neglect the tradition which has been handed down to us from our forefathers or be ashamed of it. We must acknowledge, of course, that the Evangelical movement of the history books, the movement which began in the Church of England in the eighteenth century, had no special insights about worship; it simply emphasized certain characteristics of the Book of Common Prayer and of its traditional interpretation.

You were all taught in your Evangelical theological colleges that the first duty of a minister of the Gospel is “to become and to continue a real man of prayer”. What is a real man of prayer? Let me answer in the words of a saintly representative of another tradition in our Church. “He is one who deliberately wills and steadily desires that his intercourse with God and other souls shall be controlled and actuated at every point by God Himself; one who has so far developed and educated his spiritual sense, that his supernatural environment is more real and solid to him than his natural environment. A man of prayer is not necessarily a person who says a number of offices, or abounds in detailed intercessions; but he is a child of God, who is and knows himself to be in the deeps of his soul attached to God, and is wholly and entirely guided by the Creative Spirit in his prayer and his work. This is not merely a bit of pious language. It is a description . . . of the only really apostolic life. . . . The laity distinguish in a moment the clergy who have it from the clergy who have it not: there is nothing that you can do for God or for the souls of men, which exceeds in importance the achievement of that spiritual temper and attitude”.¹ “It must and will affect all those whom you visit, preach to, pray with, and to whom you give the sacraments. It will make the difference between Church services which are spiritual experiences to those attending them, and Church services which consist in the formal recitation of familiar words.”²

Those words are taken from a book which should have a convenient place in every clergyman’s library. They expose, if I mistake not, the place where there is the greatest failure among the members of this assembly, but there is bound also to be the realization among us that Evangelical Insights are things not merely to be seen but also to be acted on. Catholic and Evangelical alike have always insisted that

¹ E. Underhill, *Concerning the Inner Life*, pp. 4-5.

² *op. cit.*, p. 6.

the Christian believer, and especially the Christian minister, must have his times of solitude with God ; but they are not our only times of prayer. Miss Underhill writes later : " These times of secret prayer should train the priest to live more and more intensely towards God in his conducting of liturgic prayer. You do far more for your congregations, for helping them to understand what prayer really is, and to practise it, for quickening their religious sensitiveness, by your unselfconscious absorption in God during services, than you can hope to do by any amount of sermons, instructions, introduction of novel and attractive features, etc. . . . For very many of them, the time that they spend with you in church is the only opportunity which they have of seeing what prayer is ; and it is your great opportunity to show them what it is ".¹

Someone will assuredly want to add : that certainly will not happen when prayers are intoned on one note. Probably it will not, but neither will it happen when one of us roars like a lion ravening the prey or preaches the service at the congregation. Our worship must be directed towards God, and we shall only do that when our minds are garrisoned with a humble and awe-struck sense of adoration. " It is only when our hearts are actually at rest in God, in peaceful and self-oblivious adoration, that we can hope to show His attractiveness to other men." ² Only so also shall we win them into seeing the life of prayer and worship as a desirable, joyful and lovely thing.

We have to discipline our minds and wills towards adoration, but many men have one or both of two more fundamental problems than that practical one which have to be dealt with first of all. The first is this, that some of us really believe that organized public worship, and even our Prayer Book forms of it, are spiritually of less value than our spontaneous, private prayer. This is a misunderstanding by no means confined to the present company. Another Evangelical Catholic, Father A. G. Hebert, tells how " a principal of a theological college, called upon to help newly ordained clergy with their daily meditation, found that they were getting into difficulties because they treated their meditation as something quite separate from their daily office. He advised them to let the one nourish the other ; not to think of the recitation of the office as a mere duty, after the performance of which they might hope to get down to ' real prayer ' ; but to treat the office itself as the main act of devotion, making sure of a few minutes beforehand, if possible, in order to bring their private petitions into it and, when it was over, letting their meditation be helped by what God had shown them in the Psalms and Scriptures for the day ".³

This difficulty is certainly to be found in Evangelical theological colleges. It also arises over the relating together of Sunday worship and private prayer ; but it helps enormously if we get our doctrine right. The truth is that " the prayer of the individual member of the Body is not something separate from the prayer of the Body, but a part of it. The best way of private prayer is that which trains up the members of the Body in the common life of faith and love by which

¹ op. cit., p. 22.

² op. cit., p. 27.

³ A. G. Hebert, *Liturgy and Society*, p. 222.

the Body lives, which unites and does not divide, which kindles in the soul the sense that the object of each soul's faith and devotion is the common treasure of all".¹

Such a statement as that would have met with the approval of Charles Simeon who bore the reproach that he was "more of a Churchman than a Gospel-man". For all his intense discipline of private prayer he could also have endorsed this other statement of Father Hebert's that "as the Christian redemption is not merely individual but social, so the normal type of Christian worship is not the individual's meditation, but the common worship of the Body, when the members are met together to learn the meaning of the common life which is in Him".² This is one of the places where we should allow Evangelical theory to walk in step with Evangelical practice. Among any group of Evangelicals, say in a university, while the life of personal prayer and Bible reading is fostered and followed there is also a strong corporate devotional life, where prayer is learned, where the Bible is studied and where doctrinal and moral idiosyncrasies are checked. Regularly, too, we all read, presumably with approval, that "although we ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before God; yet ought we most chiefly so to do, when we assemble and meet together" for common worship. In this respect we stand firmly in the Catholic tradition which in its own manner has encouraged the devotional life of the individual. If it is an Evangelical insight to see the importance of the individual in God's scheme of salvation that must not diminish the scriptural emphasis on the corporate. "The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me"—"thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift"; but also, "Christ loved the church and gave himself for it". We must not in our thinking about worship and our ordering of it ignore what the Bible has to say about the people of God.

The second fundamental problem is over the way in which public worship should edify. That it should edify is a presupposition of the Prayer Book which in this respect as in others is truly scriptural, but some of us are inclined to treat its services as though they were only our own private prayers transferred to church and said in the company of other people. So we look for some special inspiration or enjoyment from every service and if we do not get these things we are grievously cast down; we expect every sentence to be full of meaning for us personally and when it is not we are sadly frustrated. The Prayer Book is constructed on a different theory. "If a man coming out of church says to us, 'I have gained nothing to-day,' we shall reply, 'My friend, you are seeking the wrong thing. Do not hope to pluck an oak tree from an acorn in a day. Let the discipline of Christ's worship grow with you from year to year, and you will find in the end that you have as many rings about you as has an oak tree, and have gained in sixty years as much strength in the spiritual world as it has in the material'. In the whole Anglican rationale of worship, there is no point more fundamental than this, and nothing in which its

¹ *op. cit.*, p. 222.

² *op. cit.*, p. 160.

adherence to the essential Catholic tradition is more clear.”¹ Here is the justification for the orderly use of the Psalter. Here is the reason for normally following a lectionary rather than determining the lessons by the subject which, for good reasons or bad, the preacher has chosen for his sermon. The worshipper must begin by interpreting every part of the service, whether confession, thanksgiving or intercession corporately. When he does this, many things may come alive for him and there may be immediate edification, but everything can be full of meaning as he thinks of the failures, achievements and needs of his own congregation, of the Church of England, of some other part or the whole of the Church Universal. As Anglican Evangelicals we must, in one sense of the word, be formalists.

At this stage the question naturally arises, Does not all this submission to forms of public worship destroy the freedom of the Spirit ?

“ God is a Spirit : and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth ” (St. John iv. 24)—there is our Biblical authority. True enough, but there are few texts in the Bible which have been more consistently misinterpreted than this. Worship “ in spirit ” is the kind of worship which is offered by those who are born of the Spirit. It is to be contrasted with the worship of the unregenerate man which belongs to the sphere of “ flesh ”. The freedom of the Spirit is freedom from “ the flesh ”, from “ the world ”, from sin. Those who are so delivered share in a worship which is living, powerful and life-giving because those are the qualities of “ spirit ”. This worship is also “ in truth ”, that is, it operates in the sphere of that which is ultimately real, which is only another aspect of “ spirit ”. Both nouns, in fact, are governed by the same preposition ; they hold together. “ Truth ” in this context is no mere intellectual thing, though it undoubtedly includes the thinking of right thoughts about God ; it is relationship to a person who is Himself truth and it results in new life. So then the gospel test of worship is not whether we can do in it what we like, but whether it is the activity of those who, in what they think and speak and do, are under the control of the Spirit of truth. This is just as likely to be happening if the worshippers are using fixed or slightly varying forms as when they are entirely dependent on the guidance of a minister or upon their own sudden inspirations. The question is, what are the forms like ?

It is a vital Evangelical insight to hold that they must be through and through Biblical. This insight is not, of course, entirely our possession, but we have preserved a special emphasis in this matter. I have heard ascribed to a distinguished Anglo-Catholic theologian the saying, “ The Church lives by her liturgy of which the Scriptures are constitutive and normative ”. It is the word normative which for us is crucial. We ought to value extra-Biblical liturgical tradition but only so long as “ nothing be ordained against God’s Word ”. We are warned not to “ break the traditions and ceremonies which be not repugnant to the Word of God ” (Article XXXIV).

The Scriptures stand in judgment over the liturgy and they also

¹ S. C. Neill, “ The Anglican Tradition in Liturgy and Devotion,” in *The Churchman*, July, 1945, p. 103. See also *The Triumph of God*, ed. by M. A. C. Warren, p. 123.

have a vital place in it. In Morning and Evening Prayer the two lessons and the canticles which link them give to the whole service meaning, movement and coherence. Our worship is given to a God who has made Himself known in a revelation which culminates in Christ. It is with faith in Him renewed that we make our prayers. Not only is the architecture of the service destroyed but spiritual values are lost if a lesson and a canticle are omitted or the service is cut short after the second canticle and followed by another service, even if that service be the Holy Communion. The Shortened Services Act permitted the omission of a lesson and a canticle on weekdays but the same thing has, alas! been done without authority by some Evangelicals on Sundays. Evangelicals altering the Biblical balance of our services! If services have to be shortened the best method is to reduce every component a little, while leaving the basic structure intact—fewer hymns, fewer occasional prayers, slightly shorter lessons and sermon. By contrast it causes only an unhealthy spiritual indigestion when Ante-Communion follows the core of Mattins and Evensong as part of the same service. Again, whatever may be said in extenuation of the omission of Ante-Communion after a full Word-of-God-service it is no fitting or final solution of the problem, and there is nothing at all to be said for its omission on weekdays when the Communion is being held on its own. It is almost unbelievable that Evangelicals should have administered the Communion without even a reading of the Word; but perhaps that practice has ceased.

We are recovering the insight that the Holy Communion and Holy Baptism as well are thoroughly Biblical and Evangelical ordinances and not to be suspected or done in a corner. In them the highest is not only spoken but acted. So it is also with ceremonies which are "apt to stir up the dull mind of man to the remembrance of his duty to God, by some notable and special signification, whereby he might be edified". In this matter the Church of England is not Puritan and it is wrong if any of us attempt to make her so, but we approach the Puritans this far that we ask for ceremonies that are "neither dark nor dumb", "but are so set forth, that every man may understand what they do mean, and to what use they do serve".

Worship, that is, must be intelligible, and not only its ceremonies but also its words. The right words have the capacity powerfully to convey the numinous, but worship is certainly not in spirit and truth when the words obscure rather than make clear the Biblical content of services. The verbal part of our liturgy is a treasure not lightly to be cast away, but the time has come for careful examination of it with a view to reform and possibly also the use of a contemporary translation of the Bible. A multitude of liturgical versions would be unsatisfactory, and my own judgment is that none of the existing translations will serve. The new English one, now in preparation, should be forwarded with our prayers as it is certainly awaited with great expectancy.

Though forms of worship in themselves are no hindrance to worship in spirit and truth, yet they may become so if there is a love of the archaic merely for the sake of the archaic or there is an unwillingness to heed whether God has something new to say to the Church about its

ordering of life and worship. "Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish, ceremonies or rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to edifying" (Article XXXIV). For change and abolition of what has been used in the past those who live in the realm of spirit and truth must be ready, always remembering that the appointment of a common order and discipline "pertaineth not to private men".

The true spiritual worship in which we are seeking the better to share will be found most naturally in places where the details of the surroundings are of assistance. "Surely it is part of your business," says Miss Underhill, "to make your church homely and lovable. . . . It must be a place which does not receive people with that forbidding air of a spiritual drawing-room in dust sheets, peculiar to many Anglican churches during the week; but which abounds in suitable suggestions, offers an invitation which it helps them to accept. A place in fact, to which your own prayers have helped to give the requisite quality of homeliness".¹ There must be the same loving and prayerful care of every detail of the services—good and clean robes and Communion linen, flowers fresh and well-arranged, no dust or din, movement full of dignity yet leaving room for quite spontaneous naturalness. "We, the laity, know instantly the difference between the churches which are served with love and devotion and those which are not. And we know from this, what their ministers are like. And what you are like, is going to depend on your secret life of prayer."²

From this life springs also the true spontaneity of worship, which has been described in this way: "If you yourselves feel the love, joy and peace, the utter delightfulness of the consecrated life—and this to such an extent, that every formal act of worship in church is filled with the free spontaneous worship of your soul. This is what wins people above all. It raises the simplest vocal prayer, the most commonplace of hymns, the most elaborate ceremonial action, to the same level of supernatural truth".³ That is the level on which the minister must live and the congregation also, for worship is corporate. Every member of Christ must live in the secret place of the most High and bring the treasures he finds there into the common worship. Each and all must also find fellowship outside that worship, in the informal prayer meeting, in a friendly social life, in common service of the local community and in evangelistic endeavour. Worship is the primary duty of the Christian and the Church but it is not true worship if it is not issuing in practical love for all and in evangelistic work. Worship should lead to these things and be itself enriched by them. "Unless the worshipping Church goes out to be the witnessing Church, the very nerve centre of its life is cut. The faithful gather at the Eucharist to be made one bread, one body in the Lord—but only that that Eucharistic Body of Christ may be broken and scattered and given for the feeding of the nations. Only so can the Church fulfil its vocation of being the Body of a crucified Head."⁴ These words express a

¹ *op. cit.*, pp. 48-9.

² *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³ *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁴ S. C. Neill, *Christian Partnership*, p. 38.

profound Evangelical insight, and they help to show how the Gospel Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is the norm of worship in spirit and truth.

On Writing the History of the Evangelical Revival*

BY THE REV. J. S. REYNOLDS, B.LITT., M.A.

THE need for a full-scale history of the evangelical movement has long been apparent, and in recent years increasingly recognized. It has been a weakness, characteristic of the evangelicalism of the first half of the twentieth century—if the work was to be done by those most likely to take it up—that this task has remained until now unattempted. The fact is that true evangelical fervour and the habit of mind of the historian do not, as a rule, go hand in hand. With some exceptions, as far as the study of history is concerned, the traditional, conservative evangelicals have often been too busy to ponder. With about an equal number of exceptions, the liberals have been, almost by definition, suspicious of anything which savoured of antiquarianism. But in the more robust days of the eighteenth century, we had the church histories of Joseph Milner and Thomas Haweis, and in the earlier nineteenth century, when evangelicalism had not yet reached its zenith, the *Ecclesiastical Memoir* of J. W. Middelton. Later we come upon the painstaking work of Charles Hole, sometime lecturer in ecclesiastical history at King's College, London, the worth of which, to the discriminating student, can scarcely be overestimated. These men recognized the value of recording the manner of the Holy Spirit's working through the centuries, and even in the details of the comparatively recent past. In this they were truly anglican. But in the succeeding age, of thoroughly scientific history, the evangelicals have relatively little to show, even in regard to their own development. With the increase of pietist ways of thought, and the consequent decline of learning among more conservative evangelicals, the study of non-Biblical history was one of the first casualties. Hitherto the general reader has had to rely chiefly on Balleine's excellent account, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England*, which, though still in print, was first published over forty years ago. This book has been fairly widely read outside evangelical circles. But as far as a more learned survey is concerned, the nearest approaches have been made by historians of other schools of thought, some of whom (though this is not true of the author of that landmark in evangelical historical studies, Canon C. H. E. Smyth's *Simeon and Church Order*,

* *The Early Evangelicals: A Religious and Social Study*. By L. E. Elliott-Binns. 1953. Lutterworth Press. p. 464. 31/6.