

Objectivity in Worship.

IN a careful study of New Testament worship one is arrested by its emphasis on the elements of Praise, Adoration and Thanksgiving. Even more arresting is the psychological counterpart to this, viz., the objective attitude of mind on the part of the worshippers. Their thoughts, during worship, were directed far more outwards, than inwards. This feature of that great Worship has remained with me as one of the outstanding facts about it.

And not only an outstanding fact, but also, to us modern Protestants, a challenging one. For we live in a time when men have largely ceased to be aware of a whole world of realities outside themselves, those objective realities of the Presence and Power of God in history and in everyday life. One of our insidious diseases, indeed, is the disease of an undue subjectivity. "We are trapped in the prison-house of ourselves," as Daniel Jenkins put it recently in a Christian News-Letter Supplement, *Concerning Prayer*, "and despite our best efforts we have lost the contact our fathers had with the spiritual world outside themselves, which was to them more real and enduring than their own thoughts and feelings about it." At this very point the worshippers of New Testament times meet us with the challenge of their objective outlook, and the steady direction of their gaze not inwards upon their own thoughts and feelings, but outwards upon God and His majestic and gracious deeds, and their expression of this attitude of mind in a sustained outpouring of Adoration, Praise, and Thanksgiving to Him.

Thanksgiving and Praise predominated in the earliest Worship. Confession and Petition remained, comparatively, in the background. To Intercession alone was a place given at all comparable with that accorded to Thanksgiving and Praise. All this was clearly the natural outcome of that objective poise of mind of which we have spoken. Although the worshipper's inner experience might have been vivid and absorbing, and his present needs and troubles often keen and urgent, yet when he was at worship along with his fellows his mind was not in the habit of lingering amongst these subjective things. Always it was being pulled away to look outwards in adoring wonder to what had been done by Almighty God, and Jesus Christ, His Son. The Incarnation, the obedience and suffering of Jesus, his Death, his Resurrection,—these and other equally concrete things were the steady objects of contemplation; and if ever a subjective bias of thought did assert itself unduly within him, it would soon be corrected by some fresh manifestation of God's living power displayed before his very eyes, perhaps by the sight of some brother swept to his feet and constrained to pour out his soul in exalted speech or prayer quite above the level of his normal capacities. Indeed the whole drama of salvation was conceived by the early Church more objectively than it is by us. It was more than the inner conversion of a man to a new way of living and thinking. Rather was it a wonderful descent upon him of new powers coming direct from God.

It is a humbling and chastening experience when one begins to realise how unreservedly these early worshippers believed in the presence of God's Spirit amongst them, and with what confident joy they yielded themselves over to its power. Clearly there are deep lessons waiting to be learned from them before our worship can even approach to the reality and power of theirs. We must, however, be content to leave these deep matters aside meanwhile, and confine ourselves to a few modest practical suggestions for remedying the more glaring defects of subjectiveness in our worship.

Let us consider first the Prayers, since they are the most important thing in this connection. Surely the challenge here is that we should add more strength and content to the Prayers of Adoration, Praise and Thanksgiving. I venture to suggest one way in which we might endeavour to secure this, though my suggestion is merely as an example of the kind of effort we might make. In the last resort each man must work out for himself the technique most consonant with his own temperament and powers.

Suppose we have decided to preach a sermon on a subject mainly ethical, let us say some aspect of self-control. With the average preacher this will result in a

sermon largely subjective, deliberately aimed at turning the thoughts of the hearers in upon themselves. It might be well, at this point, to remind ourselves that our traditional Scottish Worship with its deeply cherished emphasis on the sermon commits us to a considerable measure of the subjective. As preachers our function is prophetic. We are men coming from God to the people, carrying to them His Word ; and not a few of our difficulties in the conduct of worship are due to our having allowed this prophetic function to overshadow and dwarf our other equally vital function when, as priests, we lead the prayers and praises of the people, ceasing to be men coming from God to the people, but becoming instead men who go to God with and for the people. In exercising this latter function the direction of our thought will appropriately be outwards and upwards, whereas in the former it tends almost inevitably to gravitate inwards. True enough, the greatest preachers have been largely immune against the onsets of subjectiveness ; for they usually possess a gift for placarding God's Truth before their people in strongly objective forms, and having done this, are content to stand aside and leave it to the Truth itself to drive its message home.

But, alas, such dynamic presentation of truth appears to lie beyond our present powers, and most of us must be content to aim our shafts directly at the minds and hearts and wills of our people, thus committing ourselves to a large measure of subjective approach. It is all the more incumbent upon us, therefore, to counterbalance this bias by a strong objectivity in the other acts of corporate worship. Above all, we must see to it that in the prayers the stream of thought is kept flowing steadily Godwards, lest they become like that prayer of the popular American preacher which was described as " the most eloquent prayer ever addressed to a Boston congregation."

To return from this digression. With our sermon on self-control well in hand, we shall be wise not to delay the preparation of the prayers. We might set about this by considering which of the attributes of God corresponds best with this subject of self-control. Suppose we decide on the Power of God,—not His power in Nature, which can be reserved for another occasion, but His power in men's lives, confirming the strong, steadying the tempted, recovering the defeated, giving power to the faint. Surely a spacious enough subject to give to our thinking room for manoeuvre, yet at the same time definite enough to provide it with a confident sense of direction. Let us, then, gather our Praises and Thanksgivings around the thought of the Power of God, giving expression to them as simply, directly, warmly, and artistically as we can, drawing help from the Church's rich stores of devotion. If we prepared for worship in this fashion week after week, we would accomplish some things well worth while. We would give to each service a considerable measure of unity, binding together its objective and subjective elements ; we would clarify our own thinking on the essentials of the Faith ; we would gradually build up a robust and flexible ritual that would be our own (and is any ritual, even the finest, worth very much either to us or to the people unless it expresses our inmost thought ?) ; best of all, we would be sharing with our people, Sunday after Sunday, in a succession of positive and objective thoughts about God, passing these on to them in the most moving form of all, not in the abstract and didactic fashion of the average sermon, but in the more concrete and dramatic forms of the language of devotion, warmed and irradiated by the spirit of thanksgiving and praise. The programme sketched involves serious, painstaking work ; but there is no short, easy way out of our present troubles. One cannot but feel that if we who are charged with the responsibility for the leadership of worship had been disciplining ourselves, week after week, throughout this last generation in some such fashion as this, there would not be so many people asking, or secretly thinking, " What does the Church really believe about God ? " ; or, " Why does your Sunday worship seem so often irrelevant to my life of work and worry and temptation out in the everyday world ? "

It remains to say something about the selection of Praises to be sung by the congregation. The history of the making and singing of hymns has been a progress from the strongly objective ancient hymn (like the *Te Deum*, which still remains the Church's greatest hymn of praise) down through the semi-objective, semi-subjective to the ultra-modern, prevalingly subjective hymn. Of these last we should be very sparing in our use ; any man who encourages the frequent use especially of the senti-

mental variety is paying scant honour to the strong Son of God, however little he may intend it. Happily our present hymn-book does not tempt grievously in this direction. Still, while there are fine objective hymns in it, there are others not so fine, and we must learn to discriminate. A few examples from familiar hymns may serve to point the way.

Take first an example of a largely subjective hymn, *Father I know that all my life is portioned out for me* (R. C. H., 548). This used to be much sung, and is a worthy piece of religious poetry, with couplets and verses offering themselves for helpful, effective quotation; yet surely a hymn to be sparingly used in worship, and chiefly then as an adjunct to the sermon. Although it gives fine expression to a certain vein of the Christian idealism of trust and service, yet the objective element remains in the background with a resultant undertone almost approaching effeminacy. How vastly different is the hymn *O God, our help in ages past* (R. C. H., 601), which like *O God of Bethel* (R. C. H., 562) retains the inspired objectivity of its Biblical source. These are robust and uplifting hymns of praise, and when we get our hearts into the singing of them they bring down upon us power from on high.

Even more instructive, perhaps, for our present purpose is *When I survey the wondrous Cross* (R. C. H., 106). Here we have a more modern type of hymn, with the subjective and objective intertwining and interplaying throughout. Yet the objective element never relaxes its control, with the result that we leave this hymn thinking above all else of that wondrous Cross on which the Prince of Glory died.

Two other hymns make an instructive comparison. *At even when the sun was set* (R. C. H., 277) is a deservedly favourite hymn, depicting in moving and artistic language the varied weaknesses and needs of men. Yet it will be observed that the author has put so much of his strength into the presentation of this human side of things that he has little left for objectifying the great Powers that are waiting to come to our aid. Turn now to this other hymn and compare the two carefully, *Thine arm, O Lord, in days of old, was strong to heal and save* (R. C. H., 86). Surely there is a strength here which is lacking in the other. In spite of its less polished and more conventional phrasing, this hymn does succeed in objectifying the Divine Power and holding our attention steadily upon that. Does not this suggest that we should reserve the more tender hymn for special occasions, when, for example, we are seeking to elicit sympathy for human suffering and need, and to mark the other as definitely the superior hymn for the Praise of God?

In Worship an offering is made to God. It is the offering of our Adoration, our Praise and Thanksgiving. There is, it is true, another offering which God desires from us, the offering of ourselves. But I am persuaded that in Worship we ought not to make this deeper offering a primary aim. Our deliberate aim should be the simpler offering of our Adoration, Thanksgiving and Praise. Perhaps it would be more adequate to describe this as the offering to God of hearts "lost in wonder, love and praise." Could we and our people but succeed in making that offering, we might well find that the deeper and final offering of ourselves would be drawn from us almost spontaneously, with little further effort of our own.

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"WHEN WE PRAY."

How many people, how many Ministers, repeat the Lord's Prayer correctly? There are two versions in common use, both of which are printed at the beginning of the *Book of Common Order*. Much could be said in favour of either version; but a mixing up of the two is not to be commended. While the differences may not be great, it is desirable, and surely not difficult to secure, that one or other rendering should be followed correctly throughout. Yet this is by no means a universal practice.