

The Reformed Tradition in Church Worship

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TOWARDS the end of his extraordinarily learned and extremely fascinating book, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Gregory Dix has a chapter (XVI) on The Reformation and the Anglican Liturgy. He tells us he wrote it and put it there after prolonged hesitation and only in deference to the advice of others. He explains his hesitation by adducing two rather curious reasons. In the first place he was unwilling to give the impression that the work of Archbishop Cranmer was in some sense the climax of all Christian liturgical development, whereas in the whole story, he says, it is no more than an incident of no central interest to the subject of liturgy as a whole, likely, in fact, to seem unimportant to a Coptic Christian who might feel that the process by which Antiochian liturgies replaced the old Alexandrian liturgy in Alexandria itself was more worthy of study! He admits, however, that a more serious difficulty was the fact that Anglicans themselves, from the time of the Reformation onwards, have been violently divided in matters of doctrine and, in particular, of eucharistic doctrine, even though they have practised ritual uniformity. Thus he feels that an objective non-partisan treatment of the Prayer Book is almost impossible and would be sure to hurt someone. That is intelligible. But it is disconcerting that Dix should propose to avoid the difficulty by an attempt to look at the Prayer Book Communion office as a well educated Syrian Monophysite might do. That would seem to imply that the Eucharistic liturgy attained its completely perfect form by 800 A. D. or, at latest, by 1100 A. D. ; and that all that happened later, in the Western Church at all events, was corruption both in doctrine and practice, corruption which, according to Dix's view, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, each in its own way accepted and hardened, and which only modern scientific liturgical study can detect and cure. Now if the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* is in such a case from the point of view of a scientific liturgiologist, how much more grim will be the position with regard to the forms of worship used in the Reformed Churches, unless,

indeed, it is somehow not regarded as fatal to fail to interest Copts and Syrians, so long as the Scots and the English of today, or some of them, are prepared to be interested vitally, if not scientifically, in the reality of worship as offered, rather than in the forms in which it is expressed.

So far as the forms are concerned we are familiar with the purely negative view that the Reformed Churches were moved solely by a violent antipathy to anything that in the very least savoured of Rome, and consciously and deliberately rejected anything that might carry the suggestion of a Romeward tendency, for the sole reason that it did so. This view is plausible enough. Its alleged "papisty" was the ground of the popular hostility to the liturgy of 1637 popularly and not altogether unjustifiably known as Laud's; and similar criticism has been levelled in our own day against our own *Book of Common Order*. But against the 1637 liturgy it might very well have been cogently urged that it was conceived in entire opposition to Reformed doctrine with regard to the ministry and sacraments, a doctrine believed to be drawn from Scripture alone.

On the other hand there are those, historically minded, who believe that they can trace continuity, albeit unconscious, between Medieval and Reformed worship, so that Calvin's Prayer Book, Knox's *Liturgy* and the *Westminster Directory* can be shown to have their place in liturgical history proper, and may be analysed and explained with the use of technical liturgical terms. Calvin and Knox may have supposed that they had thrown out the dirty clothes of the Babylon from which they had emerged, and had provided their followers with new suits after the pattern revealed in Scripture. And yet in their own ordinances they were still influenced by the forms with which they had been familiar. I confess that the signs of continuity of form which some have detected do not seem to me to be quite so clear as is sometimes alleged. The discovery of them may be due in part if not to wishful thinking at all events to a certain willingness or even eagerness to see them. But I agree, of course, that to deny outright that they exist would be unhistorical. Even the exegesis of the text of Scripture, as for example, by Calvin, has traditional elements in it side by side with the influence of Renaissance scholarship and the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*. The fullest and fairest, the most striking, even sensational, and yet to me most convincing account of the whole matter so far as forms of worship are concerned, is to be found in

Gregory Dix's book already referred to. He shows how various corruptions in the late Medieval Church, particularly in its sacramental thought and practice, led to the apparent rejection of the system as a whole. He shows how Medieval devotional manuals prepared for use by the laity during the celebration of the Mass, but without reference to what was actually taking place at the altar, go far to explain the Reformed insistence that the rite must be made explicitly meaningful to all who were present when it was performed. It must be the worship, the meaningful worship, of the entire congregation, and it must be dominated by an intense realization in all that what is happening is a response to God's gracious Gospel in word and action.

Indubitably the Reformation had a negative and violently polemical side which we are apt to find unedifying and even offensive today. Unhappily, Christian history has almost from the beginning been marked by polemics which in these latter days we may regret. Nearly everyone in the 16th century recognized that reform was necessary; why then could it not have been accomplished peacefully, without "tumult" and passion? It is useless now to lament the actual course of events, however unhappy we may feel it to have been in certain aspects. The Reformation was not, perhaps, a tragedy, but it had tragic features, largely due to non-theological factors which complicated the movement and were mainly responsible for the bitterness engendered. The treatment of Luther's Protest by the ecclesiastical authorities took the matter at once into the region of power politics, and the outbreak of the Peasants' War forced him to take sides in the class struggle of his time. Religion being inevitably mixed up with secular interests, Reformation involved the Wars of Religion lasting for a century or more and leaving bitter memories and hatreds, and hardened traditions. The cleavage between Protestantism and Romanism undoubtedly went deeper than that between Romanism and Eastern Orthodoxy, theologically and religiously deeper. The pity is that those who broke away from Rome had no opportunity to develop peacefully and positively along their own lines and in their own way. Western Europe was politically and diplomatically too much of a unity, and religion too closely bound up with politics to allow the nations which were only beginning to be self-conscious to follow each its chosen form of faith and Church life, whether Roman or Lutheran, Anglican or Reformed, in peaceful co-existence on the principle *Cuius regio eius*

religio. Lutherans and Anglicans might conceivably have accepted that principle ; but Romanism and Calvinism were highly organized universal systems of doctrine and Church government, which challenged one another and challenged the other two as well. In Britain the battle between Anglicanism and Calvinism was fought out in face of threatening Romanism, and the struggle, fateful for the churches in this island, was watched with but little understanding or sympathy abroad. If our own James IV had either (a) not married Margaret Tudor and so laid the foundation for the dynastic ambitions of his house ; or (b) not gone to war with his brother-in-law, Henry VIII, and suffered the disaster of Flodden, it is possible that Britain might have been spared the long struggle between Calvinism and Anglicanism that has left scars not yet obliterated or, alternatively, has given to us in Scotland an heroic period not to be forgotten.

Our Scottish ecclesiastical History has been notoriously more than ordinarily troubled, marked by revolution rather than evolution. Continuity there must always have been, even when most vigorously denied ; but it can hardly be said to be easy to trace, maybe least of all in forms of worship, certainly when divorced from theological and evangelical ideas. I shall speak only of a few points at which the Reformation made a definite break with the past, and introduced new conceptions which have since been fruitfully dominant and which we neglect at our peril.

It is a common feature of all the Reformed Churches that they lay as their foundation a Confession of Faith. That is to say that they are confessional Churches in a fuller sense than others are. The Reformed Church of Scotland is no exception, for its earliest document is the *Scots Confession*, held to be the sum of the Gospel, derived from Scripture and reformable by Scripture. This is the doctrine to be taught or preached to the people both in sermon and in sacrament. For these two means of offering the Gospel are treated as being inseparable. Calvin can adopt an Augustinian expression, *sacramentum tanquam verbum visibile*, and perhaps even strengthen it. It may be significant that he omits the modifying adverb. But whatever he or others may say, the conjunction of Word and Sacraments presents certain difficulties, of which the least is the problem of the relative positions of Pulpit, Font and Communion Table. In practice we know how the ordinary Sunday service has come to be differentiated in the popular

mind from the Communion Sunday service. Our people now could hardly conceive of worship without a sermon, while the sacrament may appear to them to be, normally, an unnecessary addition. However this may be, Word and Sacraments are indelibly written together into our standards as inseparable and indivisible. It is when the Word is truly preached and the sacraments rightly administered (not in Church Courts, even General Assemblies, still less in Committees) that the Church "shows its face" and becomes visible. To fulfil these two functions, which are really one, is the supreme function of the ministry, its *raison d'être*. From this it is but a step to the assertion that the true minister must be the pastor of a particular Kirk. Taken in connection with the Confessionalism of the Reformed Churches, preaching of the Word must mean that the sermon must have as its theme some doctrine identifiable as Biblical, must have some definite connection with the Church's Confession of Faith.

The exaltation of the sermon can, of course, be carried absurdly far. There were, we know, historical and practical reasons why it was impossible to insist that every Sunday service should culminate in the celebration of the Holy Communion. A good case, if not a theological one, could be made for our present practice in this respect. But it is one of the curiosities of the history of Scottish worship that for a long period the reading of Scripture in public worship fell into desuetude in spite of the prescription of the *Westminster Directory*. I cannot believe that this was due simply to the cessation of the office of Reader. It must have been due in part to the realization that the liturgical use of Scripture passages as lections or lessons was inadequate to ensure knowledge of Scripture on the part of the people. Hence the expository lecture with its didactic purpose. We all rejoice that this state of affairs no longer obtains. Both as officiating minister and as occupant of the pew, I should be inclined to reverse the statement of the *Shorter Catechism* and maintain rather that "the Spirit maketh the preaching but especially the reading of the Word an effectual means of salvation to those who hear". But how much depends upon the effectiveness of the reader, not his elocution but his spiritual understanding, if the hearer is in fact to hear the Word of God. One must bear in mind the testimony of Wesley and Whitefield that Scotland stood less in need of their evangelism than England, because the Scots were more adequately grounded and instructed than the English in

the Scriptures. Yet England had its Scripture "lessons" and Scotland its expository lectures!

Reformed worship may have tended to be unduly didactic, the didactic element being out of all proportion to what may be supposed to be more purely worshipful. The present Archbishop of York, in conversation, once put this point very fairly. He said he got the impression that in a Presbyterian service all the emphasis was laid on the downward movement from God to man, and that there was little to suggest man's upward movement to God in worship and devotion. If this is rebuke it is doubtless deserved. Nevertheless I am of those who maintain that it is a feature of strength that the sermon should retain its position, and remain a most solemn and demanding part of the minister's function. The effectiveness of the Puritan attack on Anglicanism was attributed to their ministers' "painful preaching in populous places", and Wesleyanism by preaching revived vital religion in England. Angels and Archangels who behold the face of God in glory have need of *Te Deums* only, but ordinary men and sinners require to be reminded that in their relations with God they are always at the receiving end, and by the preaching of the Gospel to be incited to confession, thanksgiving, adoration and praise. Robert Leighton may well have been right when he advised longer texts and shorter sermons, but no liturgical service, even if it be a Communion service, can be finally satisfying in itself without the Word.

Before the Reformation, worship, *Cultus Divinus*, was almost technically associated with cathedrals. In his charter founding the Augustinian Priory of St. Andrews Bishop Robert says unexceptionably, "It is not sufficient for the praise of the Lord's name to heap up stones unless we take care to add living stones to the building of God". But the living stones were in this case to be Austin Canons who were to serve as the Cathedral clergy of St. Andrews, to carry on the worship of God in it "in a manner regular, pure and without defect, worthy of God". Throughout the Medieval period endowments of cathedrals by whom so ever given or from what source so ever derived, whether designed to provide canonries, vestments, lights, apparatus or fabric fund, are commonly said to be motivated *Zelo divini cultus ampliandi*. Dix, who warns us against idealizing the Middle Ages, nevertheless speaks nostalgically of a society which is prepared to support bodies of men who are expected to be occupied full time on its behalf with the worship of God. No

doubt that was the ideal but it was notoriously travestied in practice, at least by those nominally responsible. It is true that Canons were held bound to provide substitutes,—vicars-choral, to carry on the cathedral services, and presumably they did so with all liturgical and musical skill. The Reformers were perhaps too scornful of “places where they sing” and of vicarious worship in general as they saw it in cathedrals and “colleges”. Worship they supposed was an affair of the Christian people gathered for that purpose as congregations in parish churches, in which, when the Word was preached and the sacraments administered in the context of prayer and psalmody, the Church became visible.

The change from cathedral to parish church as the venue of the worship of God doubtless involved some loss, but it certainly brought great gain. The discovery of the congregation of Christian people as the worshipping body was assuredly an advance in theory at all events. I am speaking of an ideal, of course, and if one must beware of idealizing the Middle Ages, no less must one be careful not to idealize the Reformed achievement. In both cases practice came far short of the ideal, and the higher the ideal the more difficult will be its realization. A little more rigour in enforcing regulations might have made the old system work with beautiful efficiency, whereas the new system, by imposing well-nigh impossible tasks on ministers and people, might appear utterly impracticable. It certainly was so for a long time after the Reformation in Scotland, when ministers duly qualified were few and properly constituted congregations outside the chief towns only very slowly made their appearance. The First Book of Discipline is not primarily a Church Order. It is a missionary programme the aim of which was to secure throughout the whole of Scotland in the shortest possible time the formation of fully constituted congregations of the Reformed type, but in the meantime to ensure that the Word would be preached at least by itinerant Superintendents, and the prayers of the *Book of Common Order* read by Readers, wherever such were available. As we know, questions of finance and political interests interfered with the working out of the programme in detail.

The discovery of the congregation as the basic unit of Church life and worship was, I believe, the great contribution of our Reformation, and the great burden laid upon the heirs of our Reformation. The congregation was never, of

course, conceived as being a law unto itself. Presbyterianism has often been reproached for its divisive tendencies, but unlike Anglicanism it never gave birth to Independency or pure sectarianism. Congregations were all under the Word, and to secure them against deviation within and encroachment from without they were held bound to "associate" with their neighbours for mutual support and correction, and for the preservation of a Common Order in doctrine, worship and discipline. That there must be a Common Order for worship was never questioned, giving detailed guidance as to the essentials. The pity is that the line which connects Knox's *Book of Common Order* with the book bearing the same title and authorized by the General Assembly in our own day, is not a straight line of development, but resembles nothing so much as a seismological graph recording earthquakes in divers places. To deal dispassionately and sympathetically with that long and passionate and indeed often cantankerous history is a clamant need today, when preoccupation with the external forms of worship is widely believed to cohabit with an absence of concern for its inner substance and reality. This Society, as we all know, is often under suspicion in this regard, and we have need to learn a lesson of patience and charity from St. Paul's handling of a similar situation arising from conflicts between "spiritual persons" and "weaker brethren". Naturally I do not presume to distribute these labels now.

For good or ill the place given to the congregation in the Reformed tradition demands that we be explicit in all that we do. I believe that is the real reason why the expository lecture for so long replaced the "liturgical" reading of Scripture. It certainly lies at the root of objection to the use, for example, of the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. The controversies aroused by these matters soon after 1690 make painful reading now; and yet it should be clear that those who opposed their use as formulae opposed largely because they could so easily become meaningless as *mere* formulae. They would have their meaning made explicit by interpretative amplification. This is quite certainly the point of Hog's opposition to the use of the Lord's Prayer. It may be that for some the recital of the Apostles' Creed in public worship is a moving experience and an adequate expression of the Church's confessionalism, while for others it is merely a repetition of "ancient and venerable words", as it is truthfully but hardly adequately

described in *Prayers for Divine Service*. Our tradition would seem to forbid us to regard the repetition of the Creed as an end in itself unless somehow it can be in fact, as it has been described, a veritable weapon of offense and defense, at all events an existential faith. Ceremonies which we may well regard as appropriate and suggestive may alienate unless and until their meaning is so explained and made explicit that they are seen to be helpful. It will not do to regard the bareness or uncouthness of our traditional worship as simply the results of ignorance, carelessness or pigheadedness, though all these things are present. There lies behind them the memory of sincere, devout and faithful ministries over many generations, and they can be replaced or improved—and ought to be replaced and improved—only by a ministry equally sincere, devout and faithful. The Puritans owed their influence, may I remind you, “to their painful preaching in populous places”, and, it ought to be added, to the obvious painfulness of their Christian obedience. A Renaissance of worship is an altogether bigger thing than merely the improvement of its forms. It can only spring from a renewal of understanding of the Gospel of the Glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ.

JOHN H. S. BURLEIGH