

S T A N D I N G F O R T H E
G O S P E L

and kindred matters

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The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church makes two observations that fittingly introduce the subject. The Gospel in the liturgy:

"always occupies the last place (i.e. after the Epistle and other lections, if any) as the position of honour".

And again:

"from the earliest times it has been the custom for the congregation to stand at the Gospel".

2. Under "Bible - Scripture Reading", Sacramentum Mundi has this to say:

"the written word had such high esteem because the writings of the Old Testament, the Gospels, and later the letters of the apostles, were understood to be the Word of God",

especially in the context of divine worship;

"reading (of them) renders God's action actually present, so that God here and now addresses his people".

In private reading

similarly:

"the living Kurios speaks through the words of Holy Scripture"

(Herder & Herder/Burns and Oates 1968 - Ingo Herman). It will probably come as a surprise to some readers to find so thoroughly protestant a sentiment in the pages of a thoroughly Roman Catholic encyclopaedia. It goes to show that Roman theology today is more influenced by Protestant thought than is often realised, and that the difference between the two, at some points at least, has significantly diminished.

3. The reading of Scripture in worship is a liturgical act and is consequently involved in the changes and development of liturgy taking place in the course

of history. It is the place accorded to the Gospel that is the particular interest here.

"There is little ceremonial attaching to the reading of the Epistle.. But from the first beginning of ceremonial development the Gospel has been treated as the very Word of Christ. The procession to the place where it is to be proclaimed has always, so far as possible, been of a magnificent character. The deacon seeks the celebrant's blessing before exercising his function. Both in the mediaeval Uses and the modern Roman rite, the textus is censed. The sign of the cross is made on the text, and on the forehead and breast of the worshippers. The singing is prefaced with "Dominus vobiscum", and "Gloria Tibi Domine". After the Gospel, the celebrant (or the bishop if present) is censed and kisses the text. There is much less authority for any response after the Gospel. The modern use is to say "Laus tibi Christe" when the Gospel has been said, but not when it has been sung. All the revised Anglican rites enjoin or allow something equivalent. But in the early and mediaeval rites nothing was said or sung at this point" (WK Lowther Clarke, Liturgy and Worship, 12th imprsn, 1981, SPCK p.380).

4. Several points in this statement are worthy of notice. First in importance is the understanding that the Gospel is "*the very Word of Christ*" So understood it naturally takes precedence of all other scriptural readings and becomes the object of an adulation in its practice and unstoppable in its complexification. The acts as they unfold are chiefly clerical (censing, kissing); the congregation is admitted to this development only at the sign of the cross on forehead and breast (though the manner of application to worshippers remains rather mysterious); and the people also participate in the responses before and after the reading of the Gospel. The presumption is that they stand for so responding.

5. The Reformation immediately halts liturgical development of this kind. A process is set in motion of more or less severe pruning of what the past was offering. This turn of events takes two forms.

5.1) The Church of England - 5.11) Decision on liturgical matters in the Church of England and especially on what to admit and what to excise from the unreformed liturgy, was subject to the contending wishes and opinions of at least two main parties: conservationists coming into conflict with puritan radicals. This story cannot be recounted here. But mention may be made of two chief elements. Concerning responses, there appears to have been some contention. Liturgy and Worship says that "*the omission of the old response to the announcement of the Gospel, 'Glory be to thee, O Lord', in 1552 is difficult to explain*". But Bishop Cosin (Durham, 1594-1672) declares that it

was "*still used in his time*", and pleaded unsuccessfully for its restoration in 1661. On the testimony of Liturgy and Worship, the response following the Gospel, "Thanks be to Thee, O Lord" derives from the Scottish Book of 1637. From then on, different proposals and formulations are proposed in different places. Today the position is stabilised in the two rites of the Anglican Alternative Service Book, 1980 as follows. Rite A (=1661) after the Old Testament lection - Reader may say: This is the Word of the Lord, the congregation responding: Thanks be to God.

The New Testament Epistle is treated in identical fashion.

At the announcement of the Gospel,

All are invited to say: Glory to Christ our Saviour;

while after the Gospel, the reader: This is the Gospel of Christ,

and All: Praise to Christ our Lord.

Rite B (ASB

formulation):

for the Old Testament lection as above;

for the New Testament Epistle as above;

at the announcement of the Gospel

All: Glory be to Thee Our Lord;

and after:

Reader: This is the Gospel of Christ;

All: Praise be to Thee, O Christ.

5.12) With regard to standing, Bishop Cosin is credited with the decisive influence.

"The direction that the people shall stand up at the reading of the Gospel was inserted at Cosin's suggestion in 1661. It is the only surviving custom actually enjoined in the Prayer Book which recalls the ceremonial pomp with which the reading of the Gospel was once invested" (Liturgy and Worship, p.314).

It is added that in a number of churches "much of the old ceremonial has been revived". The ASB Rite A (as 1661) has STAND at the Gospel; and Rite B similarly has the simple STAND.

5.2) The Reformed attitude is expectedly very different.

5.21) *"The essential thing in worship is the action of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ himself"* (W Niesel: Scottish Journal of Theology, No 2, p.381ff). The context, indeed the purpose, of worship thus dramatically changes. What is important is not anything we do, but only that we make place for him who is worshipped to do. He acts even if censing and kissing are abandoned; he acts whether the congregation sits or stands; he acts, more importantly, whether it is gospel or Epistle (or even Old Testament Lection) that is read. Hence the dismantling of the ceremonial apparatus, and with it the discarding of the honorific standing for the

Gospel. This may be an impoverishment of worship; but it renders starkly clear the fact of the presence of the God who communicates with his people in and through the Word.

5.22) Once standing for the Gospel has been discarded, it becomes an anxious question whether its restoration is justifiable. Reformed churches and their worship could thereby be seen as making re-entry into the catholic liturgical scene. But the price for such re-entry is high (see next para). It means the tacit acceptance that the Gospels are in a special and direct sense dominical; together with the repudiation of what today is generally regarded as the assured conclusions of biblical study.

6. In an ecumenical age, when different churches have come a long way in knowing and understanding one another, there is less reason than earlier that development of closer relations should take the form of assimilation. In certain areas, assimilation, or better said accommodation based upon consensus, is absolutely required. But consensus is not required about everything. The churches have been pathetically slow and reluctant to make the quite imperative distinction between where consensus is, and where it is not, requisite, and to enjoy the liberating influence of this distinction. In the area under consideration, assimilation is quite unnecessary. There is room for traditions that emphasise and develop ceremony and ceremonial, so that worship may be embellished and beautified. But alongside of these others are entitled and right to use ceremony sparingly, so that he who is the object of worship may with greater clarity be apparent and audible. It would be a pity if either the starker reformed tradition with its clear and identifiable witness be abandoned, to disappear in a welter of ceremony; or the richly significant ceremonial generated with devotions and piety in the past should be scrapped and jettisoned. Deliberately preserved diversification (or diversity) is better and contrived assimilation. (If I hear cries of naivete and indifferentism from the touchlines, I am quite willing, with others in both Roman Catholic and Protestant camps whom I respect, to accept the appellation.)

7.1) I see no irresistible reason to discontinue standing for the Gospel (as in the Anglican Church) it has a long, and (as in the RC Church) a very long practice. That the Gospels are *"the very Word of Christ"* can no more be sustained than the Anglican Prayer Book assertion of the scriptural provenance of bishops, priests, and deacons. In view of this, continuing to stand for the Gospel may include a small element of deceit. But it is difficult to demand that every, even assured, conclusion of biblical study, must receive instant expression in liturgical practice and reform. Atonement for the irregularity here condoned can be properly made by the promotion and encouragement of biblical study in general and at other points where the conclusions are equally incontestible.

7.2) Some Church of Scotland congregations (for all I know, more than a few; and perhaps in other protestant denominations) have re-introduced the standing.

On the whole I judge this to be a mischievous development. It should be opposed a) because it entails a deliberate rejection of assured biblical study results;

b) because the people, though not necessarily conversant with the details of such study, should not be hoodwinked into believing that nothing is going on, and that nothing needs liturgical adjustment in the light of it; and c) because, though it is not necessary to accept uncritically Niesel's bleak rejection of liturgical interest and development, it can hardly be proper to promote it in a direction that flies in the face of assured modern scholarship.

No doubt readers of the Record will have observations to make on these suggested judgments. They will be welcome !

(Agreed - Ed.)

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Order for Deconsecration (Cont'd from p³⁰)

6. PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Let us pray.

Almighty God,

by whose grace our forefathers set apart this soil from a common
to a holy use:

we give thanks for all who first laid out this place,
who cared for it with love
and left their names inscribed for ever upon its peace and beauty.

Grant, Lord God,

that as we have declared the end of its special status,
our thoughts do not linger here but reach out to a sinful world
with renewed strength and hope,
till every knee bows down before you
and every tongue confesses Christ as Saviour and Lord;
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for evermore. AMEN.

7. LORD'S PRAYER

8. THE BENEDICTION

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. AMEN.

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