

Letters to "The Editor"

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"A M E N" - A F U R T H E R R E S P O N S E

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C. I. G. STOBIE

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*"Let me say 'amen' betimes, lest the devil cross my prayer"
[Shakespeare, "Merchant of Venice", III,1,22]*

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I am grateful to Mr JM Ross for his response to me and my article in "The Record", Issue 20 (1989); as he kindly notes, I had broached the same topic as long ago as 1975, when, apparently, nobody, except Mr Ross, read it or found it deserving of comment.

Mr Ross's interesting research certainly enlightens me to the fact that the rot seemingly set in as long ago as 1906, in the "English Hymnal". I should not have expected that, judging from my own experience as worshipper and sometimes even organist in both Presbyterian and Episcopalian places of worship between 1924 and this present year of grace; nowhere in my hearing were Amens NOT sung after hymns, paraphrases or psalms until about twenty-five years ago. I am afraid I must remain unrepentant; the exclusion of the Amen appears to me unhistorical, inartistic and illogical. Mr Ross contends that "the whole congregation ... ought not (to add Amen) at the end of psalms or hymns, because their assent has already been expressed by singing". On this rather arid logic, the "Amen Chorus" in Handel's "Messiah" should only be sung by a choir which had been completely excluded from taking audible part in the rest of the oratorio ! Come now, and let us reason together indeed ! On the same reasoning, worshippers who join together audibly in repeating the Lord's Prayer or the Creeds should be told on no account to say "Amen" thereafter. Few, I think, would care very much for this.

Frankly, I do not feel that the matter "boils down to" solely Scriptural authority or the "practice of the late nineteenth century". What it really "boils down to" is what authority or plain sense there is for omitting Amens. I have as yet been vouchsafed no single word of rational

explanation. Of course the printing of Amens after hymns became common in this country only in the late nineteenth century, for the very good reason that it was only then that hymnaries first reached our hands; the actual singing of Amens in church music goes far back before that, it may even be to the time of Ambrose. Could it possibly be that there yet lingers here and there an odd obsession, common in the first decades of this century, but by now, it is to be hoped, defunct, that anything Victorian is ipso facto wrong and deplorable? It might be worth reminding ourselves that it was in those dark days that the Oxford Movement, The Church Service Society and the Scottish Church Society all emerged - along with those oddly unenlightened hymnbooks.

I finally beg leave to quote from a non-Victorian source: *"The word (Amen) pledges the worshipping people to what they have heard or uttered, and is thus, or ought to be, a solemn and heartfelt avowal of their faith. It is like signing one's name to a document, not a thing to be done casually. Yet in many congregations the "Amen" is left, at the end of the prayers and the benediction, to the minister, or, if it is used, it is uttered with an offhand air, so that it sounds like an anticlimax, whereas it should gather up the full heart of the people."* As Sir Walford Davies observes in his preface to "A Students' Hymnal,"(p.xi), "*An Amen cannot be too good. It is music's chance to embody the great Christian affirmative. In singing an Amen it is well to pretend you may never sing another, and put everything into it, recalling St Paul's great saying: 'In Him was Yea.'* This applies also to the utterance of Amen, even without a musical accompaniment, at the close of the prayers."

The author of that was a rather better-known cleric than myself; you may find it without much difficulty on pages 243 and 244 of the "Handbook to the Church Hymnary" - not CH3, but what we used to call the "Revised Church Hymnary" of 1927. That means it was NOT published in the reign of Queen Victoria, but, of course, the enlightened clergymen and choirmasters of more than sixty glorious years later may well have consigned it to the flames by now.

I rest my case.

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