

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

of the heart, came the illness of his wife. Mrs. Venn died of consumption, at Torquay, in the year 1840.¹ Thirty-three years later he also entered into rest.

And here we must pause. We have given a slight sketch of Henry Venn's earlier career condensed, with a few quotations, from the biographical chapter in the interesting and important work before us. In the letters, and in the private journal, occur many touching and instructive passages, which, did space permit, we should gladly quote. After his bereavement, his life became more and more absorbed in the work of the Church Missionary Society.² With what loyalty to Evangelical Church principles; with what statesmanlike sagacity; with what courtesy, sympathy, liberality, and meekness of wisdom; with what unsparing devotion; with what prayerfulness and hopeful trust he conducted affairs, has long been well and widely known. But in the account of his Missionary Secretariat, given by Mr. Knight, his confidential coadjutor for several years, and in the valuable documents appended, many readers will observe welcome evidences of these things.



ART. VIII.—CEREMONIES.

IT is obvious to the eye of the most cursory observer of religious movements that the Church of England is in danger of becoming a church of ceremonials. Not that at any period of her history she has ever depreciated or denied the value of ordinances in their proper place in proportion to the other means of grace. That is sufficiently attested by the place she gives to the sacraments, to confirmations, and to ordinations. These are all in one sense ceremonials, included in the services of her Prayer Book, and studiously guarded by her Articles, canons, and rubrics. But in her provisions for public worship, and for the edification of her people, they hold only a place proportionate with other means of grace, such as the reading of the Holy Scriptures, the morning and evening prayer, and the instruction of the

¹ In a letter written two days after her death, Mr. Venn says:—“Such mercy has glittered in every part of this dark dispensation, such ‘abundance of the gift of grace’ was vouchsafed to her, that I can scarce admit any other feeling into my mind than that of thankfulness. . . . There was ‘perfect peace,’—not a care for husband, children, all was cast upon the Lord.”

² He became Honorary Clerical Secretary in 1841, which post he held (always without pecuniary remuneration) until the close of life, though consenting a few weeks before his death to become a Vice-President.

pulpit. In the balance of her services they have their share, but not to the depreciation or displacement of the others.

To illustrate this distinction, let us place before us the systems of the Church of England and of Rome. In the latter, there is little of services rendered in a tongue understood by the people; little of the systematic utterances of the word of God, and not much of exposition from the pulpit. But, on the other hand, there is the constant service of the Mass, lighting and extinction of candles, genuflexions, attitudes, prostrations, sprinklings, and incense burnings. There is much that is addressed to the senses, conveying, it may be, to the initiated a symbolical or dogmatic meaning, but little that appeals directly to the conscience and intelligence. The people are not brought into contact with the "word that maketh wise unto salvation," either read or expounded, but are made spectators of a scene enacted by a priest; participators in a joint service in which they, as well as the minister, are actors. On the contrary, the Church of England in her simplicity of service avoids much of address to the senses. Her ceremonies are few, and derived directly from sacred examples. The water is sprinkled in baptism, the bread broken, and the wine poured out in the Holy Communion, the hand of the ordainer laid on the head of the ordained, and in confirmations a similar manual imposition. All these have distinct examples and warrants in the Scripture; and, in accepting them, the Church does nothing more than adopt the "pattern showed her in the mount." Her reliance for the impression and edification of her congregations lies much in a joint offering of prayer in a well-known tongue, in a copious utterance of the Holy Scriptures, and in expansion and application of those Scriptures from the pulpit. In her reformed simplicity, she has no desire to add to these authorized acts, or to invest the ordinance with unauthorized or scenic sublimity by superior elevations, peculiar positions or prostrations; she wishes to "do all things decently and in order," and not to put in peril the action of the intelligence by an undue attraction presented to the senses.

But it is painfully and alarmingly evident that we are departing, and that not slowly, from this guarded simplicity. A peculiar reverence is attached to one portion of the church over another, a mysterious sacredness attributed to the "altar," a meaning conveyed by the eastward position; lowly prostrations there which are not observed elsewhere, and an apparent desire to clothe the elements in the Lord's Supper with a disproportioned sacredness by processions, conveying and removing them from the communion table. As innovations, these things are objectionable, as imitations of the practice of the Church of Rome they are contemptible, and as intimating a certain belief

in the Real Presence they are grave errors in doctrine under the disguise of scenic ceremonials. And the wide acceptance which these transferences of the Church's teaching from the intelligence to the senses, sufficiently show that the evil is both formidable and increasing. The vigour and tenacity with which the controversy about things puerile and unimportant in themselves is maintained, is enough to show how unmistakably the grave and decent simplicity of service which the Reformers insisted on in the face of stormy opposition, is giving way to a taste for theatrical representations.

It may be of advantage to consider some of the causes which have led to this recent departure from the simple but not severe order of our services. Some reason or reasons there must be for the production of a change so marked and so little required. It may be that the mere law of reaction may go far to explain it. The human mind is changeable and covetous of variety. Every department of life exhibits how much that impulse called "fashion" lies at the root of many of the eccentric customs we daily notice. There is no solid reason why we should not dress as our forefathers did. Yet we do not. Each season brings with it a costumed novelty, and the old mode silently gives place to the new. Architecture varies as to its schools from time to time, and the Norman extinguishes the Italian, and the Gothic the Grecian. Philosophic theories once held to be fixed become exploded, and move away at the despotic command of the new order of thought. The classic drama held possession of the stage until a craving for comedy and pantomime drove it off the boards. It is sad to think that a thing so sacred as religion should be at the mercy of such an impulse. Yet it is. The grave severity of the theology of the early part of the seventeenth century gave way to the High Churchmanship of the days of the first Charles, and that yielded to the sternness of Presbytery, destined itself to be expelled by Independency. And that, again, gave way to the frivolities of the succeeding reign, and that to the latitudinarianism and Erastianism following the Revolution. The wheel moved round, and different schools were in the ascendant, till it settled for a long time at the dead level of negative theology mercifully disturbed by the scriptural vigour of the days of Wesley and Whitfield, and the well-known names eulogized by Sir James Stephen as the "Evangelical Succession." Then, and for many a long year after, the pulpit—"perhaps unduly exalted"—reigned supreme in religion in England. That reign, productive of the resurrection of religious thought and religious energy, could not in the natural order of things last, and men began to weary of unchanging services, and perhaps, feeble pulpit ministrations, and to long for a change. The Tractarian movement (as it is called) acted

upon the unexpressed and perhaps undefined want, and led to æstheticism and change. The march was from dead to active formalism.

Not that we subscribe to the idea, currently accepted, that preaching has so far lost in attractiveness as that our people, enamoured of these dramatic novelties, would desire to see it abandoned as a part of our public services. There are some, no doubt, who hold that the Communion and the Liturgy are, properly speaking, the Services of our Church, to which the sermon is but a decent, but not necessary, adjunct. But to the bulk of our people we believe that the pulpit, as a means of impression and instruction, is an essential instrument of edification in the Church. And there can be little question that to the middle and lower classes, who in their sturdy good sense have little respect for attitudes and dresses, it is indispensable. The Church without the sermon, even though a tedious one, would soon exhibit a very diminished congregation. Yet it is a truth that the preaching of our clergy, amid, doubtless, many exceptions, does not enter the field as an attraction on fair terms with those of Ritualism. We look for the successors of men such as Chalmers, Hall, Irving, Wilberforce, Hook, Melville, to hold the masses entranced. Against the pulpit occupied by many such men, vestments and attitudes would have had but little chance. The old advice, "put the stove into the pulpit," though a witticism, spoke a truth notwithstanding. The complaint is a loud one, that the chastened beauties of our Liturgy, and the surpassing eloquence of the Lessons, are lost in the hands of untaught readers, and the force of pulpit addresses by cold and monotonous delivery. The answer of Garrick to the question: "Why the church did not *draw* like the theatre?" spoke a deep and instructive truth. "I deal with fiction as if it were truth; you deal with truth as if it were fiction."

It must also be borne in mind, while estimating the causes which give power to the undue elevation of ceremonials over scripture and preaching, that the Public Press has much to do with the matter. The truth is, that printing is doing much of the work of preaching. Newspapers, periodicals, tracts, little books, are absolutely silent preachers. They enter into our houses, and contain so much that is valuable and forcible, that men and women find themselves relieved from the necessity of listening to a sermon. They can read one at home. True; but that does not satisfy the conscience of one who absents himself from public worship. Yet that public worship may be, both in desk and pulpit, eminently unattractive, and the ritualistic church may supply that in the shape of a decorative service which the other church does not. And if there be no sermon, why the last magazine can supply one.

It may, besides, be assumed as a fact, that there are many, both of our clergy and laity, who are not indisposed to see the Church of England incorporated with that of Rome. Dissatisfied with the simple, graver services of the English communion; fascinated by the history, organization, extent, and power of the Roman Church; saddened by the controversies and divisions which are rending the English Church asunder, they half wish to see the strife ended, and the Reformation undone. And judging by the close correspondence between the services of the Mass and the acts, attitudes, and vestments of Ritualism, one feels inclined to suspect that the two are visibly brought so nearly akin to each other, that contact and then cohesion would not startle or dismay. There may be, in other words, a real craving for such union as carried out into strikingly similar performances comes little short of a conspiracy against the independence and purity of the English Church. If it be so, there exists a motive behind these novelties which may be well considered as a cause for the great prominence and importance given in our day to ritual over prayer and instruction.

We might pursue further this question of the principal causes producing this change in the Church; but it is of equal, if not of greater, importance to attempt to estimate the errors to which it is likely to lead. It cannot be but that an innovation so marked and so rapidly increasing must exercise a very serious power on the religion of this and perhaps succeeding generations. One result, and that of a grave character, we may clearly perceive in the formation of a school of religious dogmas which the Church of England, if we understand her sentiments, distinctly repudiates. The great emphasis of the present movement is thrown upon the celebration of the Holy Communion. To that all else gives way, as though the entire of religion were narrowed into that one point, made more emphatic by frequent repetitions. Modestly, the Church enjoins the reception of the ordinance thrice in the year; but now we hear the opinion expressed, and sometimes acted upon, that the Sacrament should be received daily, or at least that there should be daily administration. In some churches we have heard the announcements of four celebrations in the week. Connecting this stress laid on this particular ordinance with the views maintained as to the Real Presence entering into, and incorporated with, the elements, and with the sacerdotal dignity attached to the celebrant, we cannot but foresee a serious departure from the doctrine of the Church as maintained, even to the death, at the Reformation, and as avowed, as we think, by her articles and rubrics. This in itself is a tremendous evil, for it is the foundation of a wide division and extended strife in the Church. We maintain as strongly as any Churchman the solemnity and sacredness of the

Lord's Supper, and hold as firmly as any the reality of the Spiritual Presence of Christ in the heart of the believer (though not a substantial Presence in the elements), and we hold the same of any ordinance faithfully accepted and duly celebrated. And we cannot but protest against the elevation of a particular ordinance on the ground of a peculiar efficacy specially attributed to this.

If that result be likely to flow from the exaltation of ceremonies over the equally consecrated ordinances of prayer and preaching, we anticipate another in the form of the corresponding depression of them. It is obvious already that the pulpit is becoming studiously set aside. The omission of the sermon altogether, the contraction of it into the ten minutes' length, the perpetual sneers about the "inevitable homily," the growing apathy with which it is listened to, all speak alarmingly as to the possible surrender of a confessedly great implement of divine truth. In fact, in the busy, engrossing times on which we have fallen, we know not to what else we can turn, as a means of public religious instruction. No doubt the educated and the unemployed may invent a substitute for it (although in Scripture a special blessing appears to be attached to preaching), and feel, perhaps, that they have done well, if not better, in perusing a good sermon than hearing an indifferent one. But what of the employed, the day labourer and artisan, the busy tradesman and toiling clerk, men who pass the week in hard work, and whose only chance of receiving definite impression for good lies in hearing God's truth seriously forced upon them. It is a serious matter to lose or depreciate an instrument of good on which apostles relied, which Christ ordained, to which the world owes its Christianity, and Reformed England her faith. Yet, with the example of the Roman Church before us, we cannot but fear that an ordinance-exalting Church will be likely to become a non-preaching Church.

And then it is impossible not to feel that a Church of ceremonial is likely to become a Church of formalism. There is positively nothing which so deadens the soul as dealing with things done rather than with things felt. Men sink down into a calm and perilous contentedness with having done something, said prayers instead of praying, reading instead of apprehending, listening and not applying. The thing is done, no matter how, or in what spirit, and the formal soul is at rest. The Pharisee said: "I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I possess;" and it had been almost better for him to have done nothing than to have rested contented in a "bodily exercise." Such a mental condition is sure to be the parent of stupefying formality, or in some cases of utter infidelity. There is a medium between these two extremes, perhaps as bad as either, that of an earnestness which amounts to superstition.

The last result we mention we have already touched upon.

We do not like the English Church to be a copy of Rome, or to see her insidiously approximating to Rome. In inaccurate drawing parallels may be seen deviating from their courses and tending towards each other, and then sensibly coalescing, the larger engrossing the less. The dignity, the power, and prosperity of England may be fairly traced to her stern religious independence. The English Church can stand on her own truth, her own dignity, her own history, above all, her own fidelity to God's word, without condescending to imitate those puerilities of Rome which have made her the ridicule of all thoughtful men who feel that religion does not want attitudes and vestments to make her powerful. On that grand and dignified independence stood the men of the Reformation, who departed from Rome because she departed from inspiration, and because her efforts to captivate the ignorant by the meretricious aids of gorgeous ritual and "lying wonders" were at variance with the truth, both dogmatic and ecclesiastical, which "was once delivered to the saints."

B.

Rubrics.

The Convocation Prayer Book. John Murray. 1880.

THE full title of this book, printed partly in red and partly in black lines, runs thus: (giving the red lines in italics, and the black in ordinary type);—"*The Convocation Prayer Book, being the Book of Common Prayer, and administration of the Sacraments, and other rites and ceremonies of the Church, according to the use of the Church of England; With altered Rubrics, showing what would be the condition of the Book if amended in conformity with the recommendations of the Convocations of Canterbury and York, contained in Reports presented to Her Majesty the Queen, in the year 1879.*" In an introductory note it is stated that the amendments on existing Rubrics recommended by the Convocation of Canterbury are distinguished by being placed within brackets, thus: []; and foot notes, with the word "*York*" appended in italics, mark the two points of difference between the two Convocations. In the introductory note we read as follows:—

It will be understood that the Volume now offered to the English Church and Nation possesses no kind of authority. It is simply published for the purpose of indicating the amount of change recommended by the Convocations of Canterbury and York. Their recommendations are contained in certain Schedules appended to the Reports presented to Her Majesty, in reply to the Letters of Business, authorising the Convocations of the two Provinces to discuss or report on the Fourth and final Report of the Ritual Commission. But it is thought that in that shape the recommendations are less likely to meet the public eye than they will be in the form now adopted.