

The Church Guardian

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See page 14.

CALENDAR FOR JUNE.

- JUNE 1st— }
" 3rd— } EMBER DAYS.
" 4th— }
" 5th—Trinity Sunday.—(Athana. Creed
Pr. Pref. in Com. Notice of St.
Barnabas.)
" 11th—St. Barnabas, A. & M.
" 12th—1st Sunday after Trinity.
" 19th—2nd Sunday after Trinity. (Notice
of St. John Baptist.)
" 20th—Queen's Accession, 1837.
" 24th—Nativity of St. John Baptist. (Atha.
Creed.)
" 26th—3rd Sunday after Trinity. (Notice
of St. Peter.)
" 29th—St. Peter. A. & M.)

SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY FOR A FORM OF PRAYER.

By the Rev. George T. Stokes, M.A.,
Incumbent of Newtown Park Co. Dublin.

(Church Tracts No. 7.)

"Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."—Matt. xviii. 19, 20.

These words of our blessed Lord are, each one, deeply important, since we find in them the charter of one of the Christian's greatest privileges—the privilege of public worship and of common united prayer. This fact is clear to every observer, that here Christ specially promises His presence to the two or three assembled in His name; but there is also another truth contained in these words which is not quite so evident, that in them also is contained the charter of our own peculiar method of public prayer, which is, by fixed forms or liturgies; for Christ graciously promises "that if two shall agree as touching anything they shall ask, it shall be done for them of their Father in heaven." I must, however, postpone for a little the consideration of the special reference of this text to our own practice, and will take it up hereafter in connection with another part of the subject.

A great many persons, I believe, looking at the matter superficially, and being ignorant of the strong grounds on which we base our practice, esteem the retention of liturgies a weak point in our Church; they think that if she was fully reformed, she would discard all forms of prayer, and leave the words of the public devotions of God's people to the choice of the minister, if a judicious man, or the caprice of the minister, if an injudicious one.

This feeling arises in great part from the superficial—very superficial—resemblance which our Church presents on this point to the Church of Rome. I hope in another tract to meet this

objection, and to show you clearly that the course which our own Church, in common with the vast majority of the Reformed bodies, adopted, was the most Protestant one, and at the same time I would remind you that the extreme from Rome is not always right—that truth here, as in every other case, will consist in moderation and a middle course. In fact, verifying the old proverb, "extremes meet." If we adopt the dangerous idea that the extreme from Rome must be right, we shall just as effectually make void the promises of God through our infidelity, as Rome has done through her superstition; for, believing thus, and acting out that belief—believing as many do, that any doctrine or practice which Rome holds must be wrong, we must reject those great truths which she holds in common with ourselves—we must reject the Bible, Christ, the hope of heaven, God Himself.

Let me strongly impress this upon you, that the mere fact that the Church of Rome holds or teaches any doctrine or practice, should not lead us to reject it or consider it erroneous, unless we have clear grounds independent of this for regarding it in that light, because we are bound to accept a doctrine or practice which is rational and scriptural, whether Rome holds it or not; in this respect, indeed, as in every other, a blind unreasoning hate will prove the fruitful parent of every error.

I have been led to the consideration of this subject by two very strong reasons.

1st. I find, as I have hinted, a feeling very prevalent among members of our Church, leading them to consider forms of public prayer a weak point in our ecclesiastical constitution; they do not indeed consider them as absolutely wrong or sinful, but as barely tolerable, as unauthorised by scriptural example or teaching, and by no means the best method of conducting the public worship of God's people. The natural result of such a feeling is simply this, that just as when men are led to consider any kind of food as unwholesome, though it may be perfectly wholesome and nourishing, yet while they so regard it, it will prove disagreeable, nay further, unwholesome for them; so in the case of forms of prayer, though they may be the most spiritual and edifying, the most scriptural and rational method of conducting public worship, yet while people continue to regard them, as many professed churchmen do, as unspiritual, unedifying, and unscriptural, they will find it impossible to use or enjoy them, as it is both their duty and their privilege to do.

2nd. Because while all orthodox Protestants are now agreed in regarding forms of prayer as both lawful and profitable, and use them in a greater or less degree, there is a small body of men called by various names—Plymouth Brethren, Separatists, &c.—who are very actively engaged both in this country and in England, in breaking the bonds of all settled communions—who, attacking other bodies on other points, specially object to us because of our fixed forms of prayer, which, they say, are *unscriptural, unspiritual, and further still, sinful*.*

The line of argument which answers one of these objections will answer both. It will, therefore, be my object to show you that liturgies, or forms of prayer, are not sinful, not unscriptural, and not unspiritual, but are the *most scriptural and the most spiritual means of conducting public worship*; and I trust that while doing so, the Holy Spirit, whose office it is to clear the mind of doubt and prejudice, may dispel all doubts and prejudices on this important point from your minds.

On this occasion I shall endeavour to prove that liturgies are not sinful, as it is alleged, but the *only* scriptural method of conducting public worship; and this I shall show by appealing to the testimony of Scripture itself, and seeing what answer it returns. It the next

tract I shall point out the absolute necessity which exists for the use of liturgies, if we wish to enjoy real united Common Prayer, and also the great collateral advantages which the use of fixed forms insures to both ministers and people.

It will be necessary for you constantly to bear in mind the proposition which I have undertaken to prove—"that forms of prayer are not sinful, because they are authorized by Scripture." This seems very clear when we look at Scripture as a whole, not in isolated passages and texts wrestled out of their connexion. Let us first appeal to the Old Testament. In the books of Moses we find a lengthened and accurate account of the institution of the Jewish Church policy; and there stands clearly recorded, so clearly that he who runs may read, that *God Himself instituted forms of prayer*; and thence we conclude that having been instituted by Him, they cannot in themselves be sinful or unlawful. Let us look for a memento at one or two passages which conclusively prove the truth of my statement. In Numbers vi., and from the 22nd to the 27th verses, we find as follows:—"And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Aaron, and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, The Lord bless thee, and keep thee, the Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee, the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace, and they shall put my name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them."

Now, what do these words constitute? They constitute a God-ordained form of blessing. God does not here command Aaron in general terms to bless the people, leaving the form of the words to his own discretion, although He had promised (Exodus iv. 15) to direct his speech in a manner and degree to which no man can now hope to attain; but, on the other hand, He lays down the express words in which he was to do so, affording thus a strict parallel to, and a divine authorisation for, the practice of our own Church when she places the express words of the benediction wherewith the people are blessed or dismissed in the mouths of the officiating ministers.

Some persons will, perhaps, object that this is only a form of blessing and not a form of prayer. Such, however, forget that forms of blessing are prayers in the strictest sense of the word. No Protestant admits any right or title in the Jewish priesthood or the Christian ministry to confer blessings of their own power and authority, but only to pray for their outpouring upon the people. When the high priest of old pronounced the words—"The Lord bless thee and keep thee," &c., he merely prayed to God to keep and bless Israel: when your minister pronounces the words—"The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds," &c., he does not confer by his own power and authority the peace of God; he merely authoritatively effectually prays to God to grant unto you that unspeakable gift. You can thus clearly see the futility of this objection, and that the Lord in laying down a form of blessing, has decided the lawfulness of forms of prayer, at least under the Old Dispensation, because a form of blessing is essentially a form of prayer.

And further still, though the worship of the tabernacle, as far as we can gather from the books of Moses, consisted more in symbolic acts, sacrifices, &c., than in what we call public prayer, we do find whenever any kind of public prayer is commanded, that a special form is laid down for it. If you will look at the twenty-sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, you shall find this statement conclusively proved. Indeed, almost the whole of the chapter is taken up with forms of prayer for different parts of Divine Service. From the first to the twelfth verses, we find recorded the form of confession and prayer which were to be used

*The use of a Liturgy is one of the favourite objections of Plymouth Brethren when dealing with weak members of the Church of Ireland.