

Correspondence.

Public Worship.

No. 4.

TO REV. JOHN LAINO, D.D., Convener of
Committee on Public Worship.

OTTAWA, March 7th, 1896.

SIR,—From the circumstance that the three letters which I ventured to address you last November on the subject of Public Worship have been somewhat criticised, I feel it a duty to trouble you with a few remarks on some of the objections which have been raised.

A dislike has been expressed to a liturgy. My third letter deals with this point; it is therefore unnecessary to repeat the facts I submitted, (see note). I do not feel myself called upon to justify the use of an inflexible liturgy for I do not advocate its introduction. I alluded in my letters to a liturgical service mainly for another purpose; my object was to give prominence to the fact that such a service is related historically to our own branch of the Presbyterian family, that it is, and always has been, the form of worship in other Reformed Churches, and that there is nothing in our principles, traditions or standards to prevent the reading of prepared prayers.

My aim has been to point out defects not in Presbyterian principles or doctrine, but in the form of our worship, as at present prevailing. My hope has been that we should find a remedy for these defects, not by revolutionary change, not even by reverting to the practice of the fathers of our Church, in the first century of its existence, but rather by a process of evolution or well considered adaptation to present needs in complete harmony with the spirit and polity of Presbyterianism.

My appeal has been that of a layman pleading that the people be allowed as fellow worshippers a larger participation in the public service of the congregation than they now exercise.

In my former letters I endeavoured to express the views entertained by many like myself. We are convinced that Public Worship is a Divinely appointed duty in which all the people should have an opportunity of taking a full part. Under the present system only a limited share is vouchsafed to the congregation; too much is allotted to one person, the officiating minister, and too little to the people. We recognize that it is the proper function of the minister, to preach, to exhort and to lead in the exercise of devotion; but we ask is it necessary or desirable that the people should be excluded from participation in the service so much as they now are? Those who think with me, are of the opinion that some of the prayers offered by the minister should be, what for want of a better name, may be termed, congregational prayers or prayers of the people. That is to say they should not be extempore prayers previously unknown to any individual present: on the contrary that they should be familiar compositions expressing the common wants and supplications of the worshippers; and whatever our views on other points, all must acknowledge that these wants and supplications of our common humanity do not vary from week to week or from year to year. We hold it to be desirable that every member of the congregation should be acquainted with such prayers as well as the minister, such prayers should therefore be in printed form, and placed within reach of all, with the approval of the Church as a whole.

Some persons object, I think most unreasonably, to forms of any kind. One minister thus expresses himself, "By reading prayers worship would become mechanical and those taking part become untrue to self and to God."

I remind those who hold these opinions that many of the Psalms and hymns are forms of prayer, and I ask what objections can there be to the use in a Christian congregation of such precomposed forms of prayer as Psalms 8, 16, 25, 34, 67, 71, 56, 103, and many others, or take the common paraphrases and hymns, those beginning with the following lines for example.

(1) "Spirit Divine attend our prayers,
And make this house Thy home."

(2) "O God of Bethel by whose hand
Thy people still are fed."

(3) "Safely through another week
God has brought us on our way."

(4) "O Lord of Heaven and earth and sea,
To Thee all praise and glory be."

(5) "Lord of the Sabbath hear us pray
In this Thy house, on this Thy day."

(6) "Great King of nations hear our prayers,
While at Thy feet we fall."

All will acknowledge that such verses are forms of congregational prayer, that they have a perennial freshness and that most of the finest hymns in common use in our Church are of the same character. Who among our people would discard from public worship the Psalms, paraphrases, and hymns on the ground that they are forms of devotion familiar to every individual and not extemporaneous utterances from the pulpit? Who among our most learned and gifted ministers would furnish extemporaneous substitutes for these forms of devotion, not on occasion merely, but at every diet of worship throughout the year?

In an ordinary diet of worship the minister offers two, three, or more extempore prayers. Those prayers, although framed on behalf of, and for the benefit of the congregation, express only the minister's thoughts and feelings. They are his prayers, and from being extempore differ continually in their content so that no person present can be familiar with them. Although some few may be able to follow the varying utterances of the minister or considerable portions of his prayer, others frequently have difficulty in so doing, and thus it is not always possible for the latter to join in the devotions in a proper spirit.

If the prayers were written out and printed and placed in the hands of each worshipper, the cause of any such difficulty would be removed and every member of the congregation would be aided in his devotion by ear, eye, and memory, and thus enabled to follow the voice of the minister with an assenting mind. In every congregation there are men and women whose hearing through advancing years or other causes is defective; such persons could with the printed prayers before them, attentively take part with their fellow members of the congregation in the common devotions.

The discussion has confirmed me in the opinion that the Church ought seriously to consider whether the opportunity of joining in public prayer should not be extended to the people. If half the prayers at each diet were read it would be a boon to many present in the congregation. Even if for one of the extempore prayers a congregational prayer, from a prescribed collection, were substituted it would be an improvement on the present system.

Those laymen who think as I do, are satisfied that it is in the interests of the Church that a concession should be made to congregations in the direction indicated; we are decidedly of the opinion that its effect would be to make public worship more real, more reverent and more edifying without lessening its simplicity.

We retain full sympathy with the wish to maintain primitive Presbyterian simplicity. We desire neither elaborate ceremonial nor prescribed chant, no inflexible service, no rigid liturgy. We desire, it is true, uniformity but it is a voluntary uniformity in general order, a uniformity in excellence, in reverence, in purity, as well as in simplicity. To these we aspire, and while we earnestly aim at some modification in our mode of worship, in order better to attain these ends; we deem it inexpedient to introduce any change which would not commend itself to the Church as a whole.

In response to an overture from the Synod of Hamilton and London the General Assembly has appointed a committee to consider how best to afford direction to the Church, to secure the reverent and edifying observance of public worship, with due regard to Christian liberty and general uniformity. Such being the case it seems desirable that ministers and elders should take steps to ascertain the mind of the Church on points which may thus be formulated.

1.—Is the present mode of observance of Public Worship in our congregations entirely satisfactory?

2.—Have the people a sufficient opportunity to participate in Public Worship under our present system?

3.—What means can be best taken to give the congregations a fuller share in the service of Public Worship?

4.—Would it be desirable to substitute printed congregational prayers, for extempore prayers, during some portion of the service?

5.—What proportion of congregational prayer would it be advisable to introduce in any one diet of worship?

6.—Should forms of service be prepared for administering the sacraments, solemnizing marriage, and the burial of the dead?

7.—Should a manual of suitable services be provided which may be used as aids to devotion in new settlements and in localities where there is no settled minister or missionary.

Respectfully submitting these suggestions for wise consideration, I leave the matter with confidence in the hands of our Christian people and the church courts.

SANDFORD FLEMING.

NOTE.—With respect to the subject of a liturgy I take the liberty of referring to an excellent paper prepared at the request of the Toronto Presbyterian Council by one of our foremost Presbyterian laymen, Mr. William Mortimer Clark, Q.C., M.A., chairman of the Board of Management of Knox's College. This paper appeared in the PRESBYTERIAN REVIEW two years ago. The subject of congregational prayer is considered at some length in an article in Queen's Quarterly for July, 1894, to which I beg leave again to refer.

S. F.

"A Holy Communion Table"—Is It Now an Altar?

Editor PRESBYTERIAN REVIEW:

SIR,—What next? I rub my eyes as I read over a second and third time in your last number, that "recently in St. John's church, St. John, N.B., an interesting and rather unusual service took place." *Rather unusual*; well, that is putting it very mildly we hope. But what occurred? We read: "A communion table was presented to the church by the Sabbath school with simple and impressive ceremonies." This is strange. Is the Sabbath school not the church, or part of it? Is this properly Sabbath school work? But what were the ceremonies? "After the reading of the Scripture lessons." What Scripture lessons we ask? Were they taken from Exodus or Samuel to prove that in the tabernacle and the temple the table for shew bread was holy? We read on: "The pastor announced what was taking place, and the elders having been called to the front of the pulpit, a session was constituted." Can this mean more or less than that these proceedings were acts of a regularly constituted Presbyterian church court? If so, then the church is compromised and must be held, if no protest is forthcoming from the Superior Court of Review, as sanctioning and approving these "rather unusual proceedings." Next we read: "The presentation was made by six of the youngest communicants in the school. Prayer was then offered, in which the holy table was solemnly dedicated to the sacred purpose for which it is designed. After singing hymn No. 53, 'Done is the Work that Saves,' the congregation joined in repeating the Lord's Prayer. The anthem with which the interesting service closed was from Psalm 26, 'I will wash my hands in innocence' (Firth)." Are we then to understand that the table which before was *unholy* has become "holy!" that these "interesting services" have produced a change on this piece of wood? It seems incredible that such a thing could occur in a Presbyterian church, and with the sanction of a Presbyterian church court. Nay, the last sentence quoted seems to us a piece of cruel irony.

Our directory for Public Worship, in the appendix, says: "No place is capable of any holiness under pretence of whatsoever, dedication or consecration." Is then a table capable of holiness when "dedicated" by the above mentioned notable ceremonies? Behold here the full-blown doctrine of "Relative Holiness," a doctrine held and taught by Romanist and Ritualist, but repudiated in all Reformed churches. The doctrine is subversive of spiritual religion, and contrary to the teaching and practice of Christ and the apostles. It is a return to the beggarly elements of "Judaism"; to a carnal externalism in religion and worship. It is Popish Christianity. On the same principle, if not arrested, we shall soon have error taught "by impressive ceremonies" of man's devising. With just such imposing ceremonies Popish bishops and priests are wont