

PRAYER MEETINGS.

Do Christians believe that they should pray with and for each other? Do they believe that their Father in heaven hears prayer, or do they believe that they can get any real thing from Him by prayer? In a word, we might ask, is their religion a real thing to them, or merely a matter of habits, forms, words? I cannot help asking these questions, extreme as they may sound, after all I have seen and heard concerning the ordinary prayer meetings of an ordinary congregation. Are such meetings characterized by the variety, the freedom, the sociability, the enthusiasm that we certainly expect to find wherever there is a common life, an absorbing interest, a glorious hope? Certainly not. Quite the reverse. Often, no one but the Minister is allowed, and just as often no one wishes, to open his mouth. If two or three others do take part, it is merely to utter the same monotonous prayer extending over the whole gamut of Scripture and human wants that they are in the habit of uttering with the dull uniformity—not of a liturgy but of laziness—at their own family worship. There is nothing to show that they have been searching the Scriptures, that their minds have been exercised or stirred up or comforted by any thought, or that there is any vivacity or vitality in their religious life. No young Christian fervour seems attracted or developed; indeed, there would seem to be among us no such thing as young christian life at all, with its delightful contagious gladness and growth. “Dull” is the mildest word, in the opinion of most people, to characterize the average prayer meeting, and this is its condemnation, for there is no dullness where there is strong life. What can we do to drive away this our reproach? One thing I am persuaded that we must do. We must convince the Christian people that the prayer meeting is the place where they ought to speak and pray as freely as they would in their own houses or to their own friends. I do not mean that they should make formal speeches, or get up discussions, for both are bad; and even if they were good, few have the mental training to enable them to take part in such; but just as a man who couldn’t for his life make a ten minutes speech on his own business, could yet engage with you in a most interesting conversation on it, so many a christian who would never dream of “addressing an audience” could speak a sentence or two pregnant with the wisdom of thought or experience, and would speak them, if he felt he was among friends, each of whom, as in a conversation, would meet his remarks with some others, perhaps elicited by his own. It is this element of freeness, of spontaneity, that we lack. Out of it would grow great things. And why should there not be this when fellow Christians meet? It is not lacking at a political, or a shareholders’, or a school meeting, not even at a congregational meeting when financial matters are being discussed. But I have heard that such speaking by laymen has been called “Methodism” by some. Well, I write this article chiefly to assure all such timid folk that, far from deserving such a name, it is actually enjoined by the Standards of the Church of Scotland hundreds of years before the name of “Methodism” was even invented.—I shall confine myself now to “the First Book of Discipline,” because in it and the noble “Scottish Confession” drawn up by the same authors in the year 1560, we find embodied the theology and desires of the first great fathers of the Reformation Church, and because in it there is the most direct injunction upon all who are able to edify the flock of Christ to do so. The duty is indeed considered so bounden that, in the spirit of that age, those who refuse to discharge it are threatened with the pains of “discipline” and the “Civil Magistrate.” In “the Directory for Family Worship” agreed to by the General Assembly in 1647, in sections X. and XII., “every member of the Kirk” is also instructed and enjoined concerning the work of mutual edification among the members of the body of Christ; but it will suffice at present to quote from the First Book of Discipline concerning