Worship and Life in the New Testament.

AMONG the many problems which the Free Church is facing to-day, considerable attention has been given to those connected with worship. It is commonly felt that the forms of our worship need adapting to meet the requirements and satisfy the spiritual aspirations of men and women in the modern world. Without entering into the question of the necessity or advisability of this, let us remind ourselves of one fundamental fact. Whatever charge of bareness or even at times of crudeness may be brought against our Free Church worship, we must not forget that that worship arose as the definite expression of a fundamental conception of the religious life. The type of worship which our Nonconformist forefathers developed, and which was congenial to them, was in accordance with the new discoveries which they made concerning God's approach to man and man's approach to God. Indeed, we might go further and say that their worship was the expression of that discovery.

According to Paul the fellowship of the Lord's Table is a proclamation of the Lord's death—"Ye do show the Lord's death." Even so, our worship with all its simple dignity is a proclamation of an inner life and direct communion which are sacred to us.

But this, after all, is only an illustration of the general truth that a genuine spiritual life requires to find expression in an act of worship. The activity of service alone can never satisfy. An ineradicable longing for the living God is in the human soul. Worship is a necessary element of religious life and vitality.

I suppose we should all be ready to admit this general truth. Yet, strangely enough, we have been inclined to forget it in our approach to the life of the New Testament period. The New Testament has often been regarded merely as a body of writings, the universal validity and power of whose message has tended to obscure the importance of particular conditions and temporary events as necessary for its origin and influential upon its formation. Consequently, the chief emphasis has been upon the outstanding personalities which appear in its pages. Undoubtedly Peter, Paul and John did play a prominent part in the formation of early Christian life and thought. Yet it is important for us to remember that not even these mighty characters could express in themselves all the life of the move-

ment to which they were attached. Behind these men was a host of converts, men and women of all classes and nationalities. Of these we hear but little in the New Testament, yet they were the main body of the Church. Their habits and their thoughts must have exerted considerable influence upon the Christian life of their times.

Most of these unknown Christians were the humble folk of their day. Mark tells us that "the common people heard Him gladly," and many of those would be in the early Church. Paul admits that "not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called." Such men and women as these had neither time nor talent to travel about for the propagation of the faith. They had their daily occupations. They had their home duties and social functions. Yet, at least once a week, they would contrive to let these slip, they would put aside all such duties and meet with fellow-Christians for worship. This it was that distinguished them from the world of their day. They were different from others because they worshipped in the name of Christ.

It is true, of course, that their manner of life also separated them sharply from the pagan world in which they lived. Indeed, their conduct was such that it deeply impressed that ancient world—no unworthy or easy achievement! But this conduct had its source and inspiration in worship. There they learned more of Christ and of the way of life which He taught; there, in fellowship with one another, they gained confidence and guidance for their daily witness; there they were reminded again of what God had done, and were uplifted by the presence of the risen Lord.

If the purest form of worship was to be found in caring for orphans and widows, and in keeping yourself unspotted from the world (i.e. as Dr. Moffatt says "in acts of charity and chastity") then we may be certain that these two acts—"the two features of early Christian ethics which impressed the contemporary world"—found their inspiration and strength in that worship. It is certainly significant that when Pliny desired to send a description of the Christians to the Emperor Trajan he should send what is chiefly a description of their worship. He discovered it was their custom "on a fixed day to assemble before daylight and sing by turns a hymn to Christ as a God; and that they bound themselves with an oath, not for any crime, but not to commit theft or robbery or adultery, not to break their word, and not to deny a deposit when demanded."

All this simply means that the strong spiritual life which an acceptance of the gospel message created had to find its expression not merely in deeds of service, but also in the

fellowship of worship. Here was the centre and hub of early Christian life. From this sphere of worship many of the New Testament writings sprang and to it many of them were directed.

During recent years considerable attention has been given to this life which forms the background of the whole New Testament, and to the strong influence which the practical needs and problems of that life exerted upon the formation of the New Testament writings. This is the great service which the "Formgeschichte" school of thought has rendered us. The attempt has been made to place the New Testament back into the progression of life and thought in which it arose, i.e. to discover for each element in those writings its "Sitz im Leben." Important for us now is this fact, that out of all this study the importance and influence of the habits of worship has been revealed. A. B. Macdonald in his book *Christian Worship in the Primitive Church* writes: ". . . as we read the New Testament afresh with minds alert for trace of the worship, we become increasingly aware that though it is not often mentioned, yet it is everywhere present behind the writers, giving form and colour and vitality to their modes of expression and thought; and ere long we reach the conclusion that their frequent silence regarding their worship must be due in great measure to the largeness of the place it filled in their lives."

The truth of these words may be seen perhaps most clearly in regard to Paul's epistles. One may indeed well ask whether Paul's writings are not addresses spoken to Christian communities rather than letters. There is ample evidence for this in the epistles themselves.

First of all, it is certain that Paul always addressed his epistles to the local community and not to an individual. He wrote "to the Church of God which is at Corinth," "to the Churches of Galatia," "to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi," &c. The one letter which he wrote to an individual and which concerned a purely private affair, was nevertheless addressed to "Philemon . . . and to the Church in thy house." Furthermore, Paul evidently intended his epistles to be read aloud at the gatherings of the Christians. He tells the Colossians "when this letter is read among you, cause that it be read also in the Church of the Laodiceans, and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea." And in writing to the Thessalonians he is emphatic that all shall hear. "I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren." We note that the word he uses means "to read aloud."

Paul, then, intended his letters to be read publicly in the

Christian communities. Such being the case, it is surely of importance that he dictated those letters, for this means that they will contain all the spontaneity and characteristics of the spoken word. This, as a matter of fact, is just what an examination of Paul's style makes clear. The letters are not literary compositions carefully written. They are the living words which came to the lips of a passionately spiritual and deeply thoughtful man.

So Paul speaks with a definite Christian community in mind, and hence we may draw the conclusion that he speaks as if he were present in that community. The letters form, as it were, a substitute for the absent Paul. Consequently, what Paul would have said, had he been present, the phrases he would have used in prayer or preaching, may be expected to appear in his epistles. The atmosphere of worship is the atmosphere of the epistles. The realisation of this background will afford us an increased understanding of Paul's epistles, and these epistles in turn will supply evidence for the Christian worship. Indeed, from the structure of the epistles we can gain a clearer picture of the forms by which these early disciples worshipped.

The first fact of which this reminds us is that the kind of worship which is reflected in 1 Cor. xiv. could not have been normal. This chapter deals rather with the excesses and extravagances which inevitably arose among the Christians as ideas and customs from the Hellenistic world filtered into their life. But we have to remember that habits which are mentioned in the New Testament were not necessarily common. Indeed, the fact of their mention may rather be proof that they were unusual. No writer of the New Testament ever set out deliberately to describe the Christian life of his times. Paul especially writes concerning pressing problems and to individual communities. The practices which he rebukes were in all probability confined to one community or to a few neighbouring communities. The extravagances are mentioned because rebuke and counsel was necessary. But we are much more interested in the general life of worship, and that was more important and influential.

This general life of worship must have been much less sensational than the practices which are directly mentioned. It was influenced less by the emotional excesses of the Hellenistic world. It was based rather upon the simple worship of the Jewish synagogue, a worship which was familiar to nearly all the converts to Christianity, whether they were Jews or the more earnest pagans, who already had learned "to fear God." This manner of worship did not readily lend itself to abuse, and so does not need mention in the New Testament.

Nevertheless, this must have been the common type of worship.

It is certain that this is the type of worship which is reflected in Paul's epistles, if these epistles are regarded in the manner suggested above. Let us look more closely at the structure of the epistles in order to gain some picture of that worship.

We think, first of all, of the greeting with which Paul opens each letter. "Grace to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ." The customary manner of opening a letter in the Greek world was with the simple word "greeting." Paul can hardly have adopted such an epistolary custom in his long phrase, although there may be an echo of the Greek Χαίρειν in his Χάρις. The word "peace" suggests the common Jewish salutation "peace be unto you." This was a spoken salutation not merely between individuals but also between an individual and a community. So we can well imagine that such a phrase would naturally rise to the lips of Paul as he faced a gathering of Christian people in the large room of a house, only he deepens its religious meaning and makes it definitely Christian by his added phrase "from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ."

Now such an apparently unimportant change as the addition of that name was not without significance. It is surprising how frequently the phrase "in the name of Christ" was attached to Christian activities. In Col. iii. 17 we read, "Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him." I would suggest that this verse is to be regarded as applying to worship. The preceding verse certainly deals with worship, for in it Paul speaks of "the word of Christ," of "teaching, and admonishing one another," of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," and of "singing in your hearts to the Lord." These were certainly the activities of worship. Then the phrase "in word and deed" could be a comprehensive expression for all the activities of worship, i.e. the vocal activities—preaching, praying, prophesying, speaking with tongues, &c., and the ceremonies—baptism and eucharist. So Paul expects the Colossians to perform every act of worship "in the name of Christ."

As a matter of fact, we know from other passages of the New Testament that many parts of worship were done in the Name, e.g. the Christians assembled, baptised, anointed with oil, prophesied, spoke with tongues and prayed "in the name of Jesus." For all these activities references can be cited.

But why all this emphasis on the phrase "in the name"?

It is because that phrase originally meant much more than we mean by it. It will convey much more meaning to us if we translate it—as we are justified in doing—thus: "Under invocation of the name," and if we remember that in the ancient world invocation of the divine name signified the presence of the Divine. So we can understand why Paul was anxious that every part of the worship should be accompanied by an invocation of the name of Christ. Thereby the presence of the living Lord was realised in all the worship. And that is why he opens his worship with the name of Christ, so that at the beginning the presence of the Lord might be there.

And after the greeting, prayer! So we find it in the epistles. How frequently Paul begins "I thank my God," or words to that effect, and then continues to utter some prayer on behalf of the community to which he is writing. How exalted is the language of these opening sentences! As we read, for example, 1 Cor. i. 4-9, or 2 Cor. i. 3-4, or Phil. i. 9-11, we can almost hear the Apostle lifting up his voice in prayer within the fellowship of Christian people. As these sentences fell on the ears of the listeners, the same silence would come to them as came when Paul was with them and led them in prayer.

Again, we think of the many Old Testament quotations which Paul uses—and uses as authorities in the confidence that they will be authoritative too, for his hearers. Surely this presumes a reading of the Old Testament on the part of the Christians. But since rolls were expensive, very few would themselves possess a copy; but the Church could conceivably possess a part or even the whole of the Old Testament. So it would be read week by week—especially those parts which seemed to refer to Christ and which the evangelists use in telling the story of His passion and death.

Again, we think of the psalms, hymns, spiritual songs which Paul mentions. Is there an echo of these in such verses as Ephesians v. 14?

> Awake thou that sleepest
> Arise from the dead,
> Christ shall give thee light.

Similar are the words in 1 Timothy iii. 16: "God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory." Or, for that matter, did the seer on Patmos hear in heaven such praises as he was accustomed to hear among his fellow Christians? "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and blessing." "Blessing and honour and

glory and power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb for ever and ever."

More of these common elements of Christian worship are also revealed in the exhortations with which Paul closes his epistles. Many of these exhortations were the common property of that ancient world. Fine moral maxims and clear illustrations were used by Christian teachers when they desired to stimulate the moral life of their brethren.

And so we come to the closing blessing, "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you," or as it is expanded in 2 Corinthians, "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all." A blessing which we find so appropriate in worship can hardly have had any other source than that of worship. So Paul ends the fellowship for the day by the pronouncement of the Divine name and the imparting of the Divine blessing to the people.

As we look back now over the type of worship which thus emerges from the epistles and which must have been the background of these epistles, we are compelled to notice its quiet forms and customs. All this is reminiscent of the sober, simple worship of the Synagogue with its prayers, psalms, lessons, creed, exhortations, and blessings. Simple men and women came together in quiet ways, and in all the naturalness of truly humble and reverent souls they approached God and heard His word to them. The excesses and extravagances were abnormal, the outcome often of perverted notions concerning the activity of the Spirit. This simple worship was the common order of the Christian faith.

It was this kind of worship, together with the breaking of bread, that formed the centre of the Christian life. This was the highest expression of their spiritual nature and this was also the source of their power for witness and service.

Whenever we speak or think of the golden age of the Church, of the magnificent service which was then rendered to the world, of the enthusiasm, courage and steadfastness of the early followers of Christ, let us remember this background of quiet worship, so rich in spiritual power because so pervaded with the presence of the living Lord. Above all, let us remember it especially as we seek to approach our own problems of life and worship.

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