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Prayer and the Departed

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FEW WHO SAT through the House of Laity debates on prayer for the departed in the Series I services enjoyed the experience. One after another Evangelical members sought to explain their reasons for opposing the prayers. Others propounded the opposing view: but there was little meeting of minds, and the issue was finally decided by trooping into division lobbies to find that the advocates of the prayers had just scraped their two-thirds majority. Four things had become clear. Both sides were profoundly uneasy about the debates. Both sides were undoubtedly sincere. Some, at least, on both sides were genuinely seeking to do what was right out of a love for their Lord. But what the Evangelicals were opposing, and what the others were advocating, were not identically the same thing: though both found it expressed in the words before them. Few guessed that in the frustrations and sadness of those debates, a new understanding was being forged.

Not many months later, the House faced a 'carbon copy' of those debates over the Series II services. To test the sincerity of those who in the earlier debates had said their prayers for the departed did not imply any doubt as to their state, an amendment was put down to a prayer in the Series II Communion to change a petition for, into an assertion of, the peace of the faithful departed. It paved the way to one of the most remarkable debates in the Assembly's history.

There had been an unreality about the earlier debates. Evangelicals were thought by others to be saying that there should be no mention of the dead in one's prayers: and this seemed unreal. Others talked of the 'faithful' departed when it was clear that what sometimes troubled them was the 'unfaithful' or at least the 'uncertain' departed: and this lent unreality to what they said. The new debate made it plain that Evangelicals might be prepared to say *something*: and the others made it plain that they might be prepared to meet this initiative with understanding. Amid evident goodwill the debate was adjourned for consultations with Convocation.

Meanwhile without great confidence a small group of laity spent a weekend together to consider the problem in relation to the burial service—two Evangelicals, two Anglo-Catholics, two from the centre, with the Secretary of the Liturgical Commission. They agreed not to pass judgment on each other's views, and to respect fully each other's consciences. The question was simply to determine whether prayers could be written making reference to the departed which were acceptable both to Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic consciences, so that they could be used by all in public worship without offence. All the other solutions were objectionable. A ban on all reference to the departed was viewed as an unacceptable deprivation by Anglo-Catholics and others. Use of the prayers then being proposed was unacceptable to Evangelical consciences. To let the clergyman do what he liked paid no regard to lay consciences and often occasioned unintended offence. So the pressure to find words to which all parties could, with good conscience, subscribe was real. And, so it proved, was the goodwill on all sides to succeed.

Some things became plain at once. There was no objection to prayers which offered thanksgiving for the faithful departed. There could probably be agreement about prayers commending the departed brother to God at burial. There was little love of deliberate ambiguity. The real difficulty was with petitionary prayer. The Evangelicals made it plain that there were two things they could not assent to: prayers which implied doubt as to the blessedness of the faithful departed, and prayers which implied that the state of the departed was dependent upon the prayers of the living. But when they conceded that they would not raise objections to prayers which asked God to do for the departed what He had explicitly promised in scripture to do, agreement became possible. They soon found themselves trying to redraft the five prayers in the Series II Burial to express that agreement. It was far from easy: but a tentative agreement was reached. The House of Laity then asked the Convocations to set up a joint Committee to explore official agreement along such lines. Reluctantly Convocations agreed, and the Committee in due course returned a unanimous report recommending agreement on the same lines as the unofficial lay group. These recommendations were set aside by the Convocations, who clearly had understood neither the intentions nor the temper of their lay brethren; nor the problems such matters can cause the laity; nor the constructiveness of the House of Laity's approach. So the Series II Burial service, with the original prayers largely intact, came back to the laity. Careful and fully representative discussions took place which culminated in the unprecedented action of the Liturgical Revision Steering Committee of the House in declining to move approval of the Service, and moving instead a reasoned motion explaining why they did so. It was passed by 159 votes to 7. Protests from Evangelicals against the agreement forged in the House of Laity came

mainly from those who did not appreciate the nature and the purpose of that agreement.

The question was remitted to the Doctrinal Commission by the Archbishops. Their Report *Prayer and the Departed*¹ is, on the whole, a vindication of the laity's attitude. Both sides of the question are stated fairly. Five 'acceptable' prayers are suggested, including one for the non-Christian dead. There is a rather pathetic appendix on the evidence of Psychological Research, and a useful one quoting examples of Anglican theology and practice since the sixteenth century. Let us consider the suggested prayers.

On the credit side, one welcomes that they attempt to find forms of words acceptable to all parties without recourse to ambiguity: and they do not take refuge in leaving it to the clergyman to say what he likes. One hopes, without confidence, that the Liturgical Commission will take note. One also welcomes the fact that there is little, if anything, in these prayers to which exception can be taken.

Having said that, the writer views the proposals with disappointment as well as thankfulness. It is a pity that the Commission did not follow the precedent set by the unofficial lay group and link their petitions explicitly with the promise of scripture. Their prayers lack the joy and confidence that this would have given them. And it is a pity that the prayers lack something of the rhythm and beauty which may well be necessary to make them widely acceptable.

The Commission do well to face the question of prayers for the non-Christian—or at least 'uncertain' dead. What does an Evangelical say when such a person—whom he dearly loves—dies? Surely there is not silence in his prayers. He recalls that God's love for the departed is immeasurably greater than his own; that God has done for the loved one all God could do: and in that knowledge, and in acceptance of God's will, he finds peace. His prayer is therefore the aligning of his will with the divine will. This the Commission recognises: and their prayer gives expression to it in a slightly timid and clumsy way. But is it pastorally expedient to have a single prayer labelled as for the non-Christian dead? For what occasions is it intended? For one could scarcely use it in the context of a Christian burial!²

One could have wished that the Commission had given us a rather wider selection of prayers following the principles adopted by the House of Laity and now by the Doctrinal Commission: which might, without over-labelling them, be useful in the wide range of circumstances which can arise. But let them all be such as will commend themselves to the consciences of all, and thus serve to promote unity rather than division. This ought always to be a function of our common prayer.

And is it too much to hope that one day the sort of people who in

the House of Laity provided this constructive approach, might be represented on the Liturgical Commission?³

¹ SPCK, 92 pp., £0.60, it is due to be debated by the General Synod in November.

² It has now been adopted in Series 3 Holy Communion. Whether it will be included also in the Series 3 Funeral service, announced for publication later this year, remains to be seen.

³ This was written before Mr. Craig was himself appointed a member of the Liturgical Commission.