

PRINCIPLES FOR
CHURCHMEN

A MANUAL OF POSITIVE STATEMENTS
ON SOME SUBJECTS OF CONTROVERSY

WITH AN

*EXPLANATORY INTRODUCTION ON THE PRESSING DANGERS
WHICH BESET THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND*

BY THE RIGHT REV.

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IX.

THOUGHTS ON THE PRAYER-BOOK.

THERE is probably no book in existence, next to the Bible, which is so well known, and yet so little appreciated, as the English "Book of Common Prayer." Out of the myriads who hold the book in their hands on Sundays, I suspect few have ever considered the immense value of a liturgical form, and fewer still have ever realized the peculiar excellencies and principles of the Church of England liturgy. On these three subjects I propose to say a few words in this paper, which I think may prove useful to many readers.

I. First and foremost, I propose to say something about the *general usefulness of forms of prayer in public worship*. I frankly admit that on this point Christians are not entirely of one mind. How does the matter stand? In what respect do the visible Churches of Christ differ? Let me answer these questions.

Some Churches hold, that no prepared form of prayer ought ever to be used. They leave this part of worship entirely in the hands of the minister, and trust to the Spirit guiding him aright. They say that the prayers ought to be unwritten or extempore prayers. This is the opinion held by the Scotch Presbyterians, and by the greater part of the English dissenters in our own land.

Other Churches hold that it is best to have a form of prayer prepared, and to require the minister to use it. They leave the minister no discretion in the matter. They supply him with a book of prayers, and direct him to read out of this book, whenever the congregation assembles for public worship. This is the opinion held by the Church of England, by the Irish Church, by the Episcopal Church of America, and by a few other denominations.

Now, which of these two plans of public worship is the best? Which is wisest? Which is most edifying? Which is most profitable? I want to say something about these questions, and I invite the reader's serious attention. My own opinion is decided and unhesitating. I am by conscientious choice a minister of the Church of England. I think it is far better to have a form of public prayers than to have extempore prayer. I will now give some reasons why I think so.

Before I say a word about the question, let me remind the reader that the matter is not one which is necessary to salvation. I do not for a moment say that there can be no acceptable public Christian worship without a Prayer-book. I am only saying what appears to me the *most useful* manner of worship. The point I am considering is not one of those on which mistakes may ruin souls. Beside this, let me remind the reader that I am not about to make a special defence of the Prayer-book of the Church of England. I am quite ready to do that before I conclude this paper. The immediate question before us is not whether a certain liturgy is a good one, but whether it is good to have any liturgy at all.

All that I wish to do at present is to give some general reasons why forms of public prayer appear to me very preferable to extempore prayer.

(a) In the first place, extempore prayer makes the congregation entirely dependent on the minister's health or circumstances, or what are commonly called his frames and feelings. He may be sick and ill when he is leading their devotions. He may be depressed in spirit by family trials or private affliction. Whenever this is the case, his people are sure to suffer. A minister is only a man. If he prays extempore, his "frames and feelings" must necessarily give a tone and colour and bias to his prayers. But this could not be the case, if he prayed from a book.

(b) In the second place, extempore prayer makes the congregation entirely dependent on the minister's memory. He may forget many things which he ought to pray for, and meant to pray for, before he entered the Church. He may omit to mention many things before God which he had privately intended to make subjects of prayer. He is only a man, and his memory is liable to error. But this could not happen if he prayed from a book.

(c) In the third place, extempore prayer makes the congregation entirely dependent on the minister's soundness in doctrine. He may be gradually falling away from the faith, and slipping into Romanism, or Socinianism, or Scepticism. He may be, almost insensibly to himself, little by little, departing from the truth, adding to or taking away from the Gospel of Christ. His people, in this case, are sure to suffer. His inward unsoundness will almost always appear in his prayers. But this could not happen if he prayed from a book.

(d) In the fourth place, extempore prayer makes it almost impossible for the congregation to join in public worship. They cannot possibly know what the minister is going to pray for. They must keep their minds continually on the stretch while he is praying, and may sometimes lose the thread of his prayer. They may even not understand him sometimes on account of his language, just as they do not always understand his preaching. But this could not happen if he prayed from a book.

(e) In the last place, extempore prayer, in course of time, becomes as much a form to most congregations as any form of prayer that ever was composed. The thoughts of ministers, after a few years, are found to run pretty much in the same groove, and upon the same rails. Their hearers, after a few years, know perfectly well their phrases, their modes of expression, and the order of their petitions. They can even make a shrewd guess how long the prayer will last, and when it is drawing near to a close. When this is the case,—and all who have worshipped in the Presbyterian Churches of Scotland know well that it is so,—it really becomes just as formal an act to pray extempore as to pray from a book!

I lay these things before the attention of my readers, and commend them to their serious consideration. I commend them especially to Churchmen. I ask them not to be shaken in mind by the common charges which are made against

our manner of worshipping God in the Church of England. It is easy for ignorant or thoughtless persons to say that to use a Prayer-book is “Popish,” “legal,” “formal,” “bondage,” and the like. It is easy to say that extempore prayer is a more “spiritual” mode of worship. It is far more easy to say such things than to prove them. People too often catch these sayings from one another, and repeat them without calm and sober thinking. If some of the enemies of the Church of England would read and consider a little more than they do, they would perhaps not talk so foolishly as they sometimes do.

Let me make a few general remarks before I pass away from this branch of my subject.

1. Salvation does not depend on being a member of a Church which has a Prayer-book, or of a Church which permits nothing but extempore prayer. We must each individually be born again, repent of sin, believe on Christ, become new creatures, and live holy lives. Without this it will matter nothing at the last day what we thought about extempore prayer.

2. Extempore prayer may sometimes be extremely solemn, spiritual, soul-exalting, and heart-edifying. I have sometimes heard clergymen of the Church of England pray extempore in public, so beautifully that I could desire nothing better. If all men prayed always, as some men do sometimes, there would be nothing better than extempore prayer. But all ministers are not highly gifted. The question to be considered is, what mode of worship is most likely to be carried on effectively and profitably to a congregation, from week to week, and month to month, and year to year, by the average run of ministers? Taking a broad view of ministers, if I must choose, I would far rather that most ministers prayed from a book.

3. Prayer from a book may often be spoiled by the bad reading of the minister. He may read so rapidly, or so low, or so irreverently, as to do no good to the congregation. He may even weary and disgust his congregation. But forms of prayer are not to be judged by the reading of careless and unconverted ministers. Let a man hear a Prayer-book read reverently, carefully, audibly, and emphatically, with all the congregation joining, before he finds fault with “formal prayers.” Forms may be read spiritually quite as easily as extempore prayers may be used formally.

4. Finally, let all Churchmen who hanker after extempore prayer, and profess to be weary of the Prayer-book, spend a few months in Scotland, and attend no other worship but that of the Presbyterians. They will hear many good prayers, I have no doubt. They will sometimes be much edified and pleased. The Church of Chalmers and M’Cheyne contains ministers who would adorn any Church on earth. But at the end of a few months, unless I am greatly mistaken, most sensible Churchmen will return home convinced that, in the long run, there is nothing so useful for a congregation as a good form of prayer.

The Church that has good, sound, Scriptural, fervent extempore prayers, in

my judgment, does well. But the Church that has a well-composed, well-arranged Scriptural liturgy, in my judgment, does far better. The way of “forms” in public worship is better than the way of “extempore” prayer.

II. From the general usefulness of forms of prayer, I pass on to speak of the *special excellencies of the English Prayer-book*.

The times in which we live make the subject of special importance. The Prayer-book is constantly assailed by enemies of every description. Even Churchmen are too ready to see the alleged blemishes of the book, and to forget its merits. In times like these it may be well to arm the friends of the Liturgy with a few simple arguments in its behalf.

It may clear our way to remind the reader once more that the question I am now considering is not the comparative merit of extempore or of pre-composed prayer in public worship. That question has been already fully considered in the former part of this paper. The one single point to which our attention will be directed is the special value of the Liturgy of the Church of England. Granting that a man is convinced that a form of prayer is best, let me try to show him that we have many reasons to be thankful for the form provided for worshippers in the Church of England.

Furthermore, it may clear our way to remind the reader that I do not for a moment maintain that the Prayer-book is free from defects. It was not given by inspiration, like the Bible. It was drawn up by uninspired men, who had their failings and infirmities; and, like everything else that comes from the hands of unassisted man, it is imperfect. I claim no infallibility for the Prayer-book. I fairly admit that there are things in it which might have been done better. But I am bold to say that its merits far outstrip its defects; its blemishes are few and far between; its excellencies are very many and very great. The chaff of the Liturgy is little compared to the wheat, and the dross trifling compared to the gold.

Let me now set down in order some of the leading merits of the Church of England Prayer-book. Before we give ear to the charges which some Dissenters and some Scotch Presbyterians sometimes make against our venerable Liturgy, let us consider calmly its many claims to our confidence.

(1) The first merit of the Prayer-book is the *large quantity of God’s Word which it contains*. A very considerable portion of the volume is neither more nor less than extracts from the Bible. To say nothing of other parts, the Psalms, the Epistles, and the Gospels make no small part of the whole book. The man who pours indiscriminate abuse on the Liturgy, would do well to remember this. Let him consider that more than one-half of a Churchman’s form of worship consists of selected passages of Holy Scripture.

(2) The second merit of the Prayer-book is the *sound doctrine* that runs through the daily prayers and petitions, which it puts in the mouth of those who

use it. The sinfulness of man, the holiness of God, the redemption of sinners by our Lord Jesus Christ, the daily need in which we all stand of the Holy Spirit, the importance of godly living, the sinfulness and guilt of sin, the weakness of human nature, the personality of the devil, the reality and eternity of hell and heaven, the full supply of mercy and grace which is laid up for us in Christ,—all these things appear again and again in the prayers of the Liturgy. Expressions no doubt may be pointed out in the Services for Baptism, Burial, and the Visitation of the Sick, which admit of misconstruction, and are often sadly misconstrued; but these expressions after all are few in number. No impartial judge can deny that the general tone of Prayer-book prayers is Scriptural, Evangelical, and sound.

(3) The third merit of the Prayer-book is the *wide variety of subjects* which its petitions embrace. It fairly sweeps the whole circle of man's wants, necessities, and relations. Our bodies and our souls, our temporal and our eternal interests, our position as subjects and members of families, our sorrows and our joys, our sickness and our health, our poverty and our riches, our journeys by land or water,—all are remembered in the Liturgy. Nothing seems to be forgotten or left out. A man's circumstances must be very peculiar indeed if he does not find his case mentioned in the daily prayers of the English Liturgy. It is not too much to say that no Church on earth brings so many matters before God in its public worship as the Church of England.

(4) The fourth merit of the Prayer-book is the *congregational character of the worship* which it invites those who use it to offer up. It does not give the office of praying entirely to the minister, and leave the people to sit by in silence and listen. It frequently directs "the people" in its rubrics. It assigns to every member of the congregation a place in the worship. It invites all to join audibly in the confession of sin and declaration of faith. It requires all to read a portion of the service together with the minister. It calls on all to say "amen" after every prayer which the minister reads. Of all foolish sayings against the Church of England there is none so foolish as the saying that it is a "Popish" and "priest-ridden" Church! No Church on earth makes so much of the laity in public worship as the Church of England.

(5) The fifth merit of the Prayer-book is its *wonderful suitability to the wants of the poor and unlearned*. The bulk of all congregations will probably be ignorant, as long as the world stands. Long, argumentative, doctrinal prayers, however clever and gifted they may seem, are utterly unfitted to most men's minds. Now here is exactly the point at which the English Liturgy is most excellent. It is full of little short collects, containing much in few words, and easily understood. It is consequently full of little breaks and pauses, which to an ignorant worshipper are of great importance. They give him time to take breath. They enable him to begin again, if he has lost the thread of the last petition. They help to keep his slumbering mind awake, by the constant change of voice,

and repeated “amens,” which he cannot help hearing. The Litany alone is a simple but eminently comprehensive collection of petitions, which even a child, if attentive, can hardly fail to understand.

(6) The last, but not the least, merit of the English Prayer-book is the *immense proportion of intercession* which it contains. It calls on those who use it to remember others before God as well as themselves. It encourages habits of sympathy and fellow-feeling with all mankind. It keeps up a constant testimony against the selfishness to which we are all naturally prone. It invites us to speak to God for others as well as for ourselves. In no Church on earth perhaps is the command to “pray for one another” so faithfully remembered, in theory at least, if not in practice, as in the Church of England.

Such are the six leading excellencies of the English Prayer-book. Each one of these six is a text, on which much more might be said, if space permitted. Each contains a seed of thought, which Churchmen would do well to lay up in their minds and remember.

The practical conclusions which may be drawn from what has been said deserve serious consideration. They ought to be pondered well by all who call themselves members of the Church of England.

For one thing,—if the English Prayer-book contain so many excellencies, we ought not to esteem it lightly, or think it of no consequence whether we hear it used on Sunday or not. Salvation, no doubt, does not depend on going to Church. It is not necessary to use a Prayer-book in order to get to heaven. A personal interest in Christ is the one thing needful. Experimental acquaintance with the grace of the Holy Ghost is far more important than acquaintance with the English Liturgy. But still, though all this is true, there is no denying that our edification in public worship depends greatly on the kind of prayers that are prayed. Let the Churchman know that he ought to be more thankful for his Prayer-book. He may often perhaps hear better preaching in chapel than in Church. But he may depend upon it he will not often hear better prayers.

For another thing,—if the English Prayer-book contain so many excellencies, the members of the Church of England ought not to be ashamed of defending it, and maintaining its cause. Let them speak out boldly when they hear men assailing the Prayer-book and saying evil things about it. Let them ask the assailants whether they know anything about the subject of which they are speaking. Let them challenge them fearlessly to point out any better worship than that which the Church of England provides. It is easy to say that the Prayer-book is imperfect, faulty, and defective. It is not quite so easy to show us the extempore prayers that are better. Of its ministers, the Church of England may well be ashamed sometimes. But it never need be ashamed of its Liturgy.

Finally,—if the English Prayer-book contains so many excellencies, let English Churchmen study the book more, and be more acquainted with its contents. Few, alas! know much about it. Ignorance is the great danger of many

who consider themselves excellent members of the Church of England. They are little acquainted either with the Articles or Liturgy of their own Communion. They can hardly tell you what their Church asks them to believe, or how their Church bids them worship. One of the great wants of the day, next to more praying, is more thinking and more reading.

III. The last thing I propose to do is to offer to all my readers a broad general caution about the English Prayer-book. That caution is simply this. Take care that you clearly understand the *great leading principle on which the Prayer-book was at first compiled*, and on which it was always meant to be interpreted. It is a principle which runs throughout the book from end to end. The mischief which has arisen, and the false teaching which has flowed from gross ignorance or neglect of this principle, are simply incalculable.

The principle of the Prayer-book is, to suppose all members of the Church to be in *reality* what they are in *profession*, to be true believers in Christ, to be sanctified by the Holy Ghost. The Prayer-book takes the highest standard of what a Christian ought to be, and all through its prayers is worded accordingly. The minister addresses those who assemble together for public worship *as believers*. The people who use the words the liturgy puts into their mouths, are supposed to be *believers*. But those who drew up the Prayer-book never meant to assert that all who were members of the Church of England were actually and really true Christians. On the contrary, they tell us expressly in the Articles, that “in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good.” But they held that if forms of devotion were drawn up at all, they must be drawn up on the supposition that those who used them were real Christians, and not false ones. And in so doing I think they were quite right. A liturgy for unbelievers and unconverted men would be unreasonable, and practically useless. The part of the congregation for whom it was meant would care little or nothing for any liturgy at all. The holy and believing part of the congregation would find its language entirely unsuited to them.

(a) This general principle of the Prayer-book, is the principle on which *the baptismal service* is drawn up. It supposes those who bring their children to be baptized, to bring them *as believers*. As the seed of godly parents and children of believers their infants are baptized. As believers, the sponsors and parents are exhorted to pray that the child may be born again, and encouraged to lay hold on the promises. And as *the child of believers* the infant when baptized is pronounced “regenerate,” and thanks are given for it. But the Prayer-book does not teach the invariable regeneration of all who are baptized.

(b) This principle is that on which the *Communion Office and Confirmation Service* are evidently framed. I suppose that no intelligent person would seriously maintain that all the communicants who say, “the remembrance of our sins is grievous and the burden of them is intolerable,” do really feel and mean

what they say! You have only to search their characters and lives, and you soon find that many of them feel nothing of the kind.—So also I presume no one of common sense really believes that all the young persons, who are confirmed, do really think that they are “bound to believe and do” what they profess, when they say in reply to the Bishop’s question, “I do.” Too many, it may be feared, never think at all. But in both cases the Prayer-book puts in the mouths of those who are confirmed or come to the table, the language they ought to use, on the great ruling principle of charitable supposition. But it does not in the least follow that all is right because the language is used.

(c) This is the only principle on which many of the *collects* can be reasonably explained. The collect for the Epiphany says, “Grant that we who know Thee now by faith may after this life have the fruition of Thy glorious Godhead.” Will anyone tell us that the compilers of the Prayer-book meant to teach, that all who use the Prayer-book do know God by faith? Surely not.—The collect for Sexagesima Sunday says, “O Lord God, who seest that we put not our trust in anything that we do,” etc. Will any dare to say that these words could ever be literally true of all members of the Church of England? Are they not manifestly a charitable supposition?—The collect for the Third Sunday after Trinity says, “We to whom Thou hast given a hearty desire to pray,” etc. Who can have a doubt that this is a form of words, which is used by many of whom it could not strictly and truly be said for one minute?—Who can fail to see in all these instances one uniform principle, the principle of charitably assuming that members of a Church are what they profess to be? The Church puts in the mouth of her worshipping people the sentiments and language they ought to use, and if they do not come up to her high standard the fault is theirs, not hers. But to say that by adopting such expressions she stamps and accredits all her members as real and true Christians in the sight of God! would be manifestly unreasonable.

(d) This is the only principle on which *the service for the churching of women* can be interpreted. Every woman for whom that service is used, is spoken of as “the Lord’s servant,” and is required to answer that she “puts her trust in the Lord.” Yet who in his senses can doubt that such words are utterly inapplicable in the case of a great proportion of the women who come to be churched? They are not “servants of the Lord.” They do not in any sense “put their trust” in Him. And who would dare to argue that the compilers of the liturgy considered that all women who were churched did really trust in the Lord, merely because they used this language? The simple explanation is, that they drew up the service on the same great principle which runs through the whole Prayer-book, the principle of charitable supposition.

(e) This is the only principle on which *the service of baptism for grown-up people* can be interpreted. In that service the minister first prays that the person about to be baptized may have the Holy Spirit given to him, and be born again. The Church cannot take upon herself to pronounce decidedly that he is born

again, until he has witnessed a good confession, and shown his readiness to receive the seal of baptism. Then, after that prayer, he is called upon openly to profess repentance and faith before the minister and congregation, and, that being done, he is baptized. Then, and not till then, comes the declaration that the person baptized is “regenerate,” and is born again and made an heir of everlasting salvation. But can these words be strictly and literally true, if the person baptized is a hypocrite, and has all along professed that which he does not feel? Are not the words manifestly used on the charitable supposition that he has repented and does believe, and in no other sense at all? And is it not plain to every one, that in the absence of this repentance and faith, the words used are a mere form, used because the Church cannot draw up two forms, but not for a moment implying that inward and spiritual grace necessarily accompanies the outward sign, or that a death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness is necessarily conveyed to the soul? In short, the person baptized is pronounced “regenerate” upon the broad principle of the Prayer-book, that, in the Church services, people are charitably supposed to be what they profess to be.

(f) This is the only intelligible principle on which *the burial service* can be interpreted. In that service the person buried is spoken of as a dear brother or sister. It is said that it hath pleased God of His great mercy to take to Himself his soul. It is said, “We give Thee hearty thanks that it hath pleased Thee to deliver this our brother out of the miseries of this sinful world.” It is said that “our hope is this our brother rests in Christ.” Now what does all this mean? Did the compilers of the Prayer-book wish us to believe that all this was strictly and literally applicable to every individual member of the Church over whose body these words were read? Will anyone look the Service honestly in the face and dare to say so? I cannot think it. The simple explanation of the service is, that it was drawn up, like the rest, on the presumption that all members of a Church were what they professed to be. The key to the interpretation of it is the same great principle, the principle of charitable supposition.

(g) This is the only principle on which *the Catechism* can be interpreted. In it every child is taught to say, “In baptism I was made a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven;” and a little further on, “I learn to believe in God the Holy Ghost who sanctifieth me and all the elect people of God.” Now what does this mean? Did the Prayer-book writers intend to lay it down as an abstract principle that all baptized children are sanctified and all elect? Will anyone in the present day stand forth and tell us that all the children in his parish are actually sanctified by the Holy Ghost? If he can, I can only say that his parish is an exception, or else Bible words have no meaning. But I cannot yet believe that anyone would say so. I believe there is but one explanation of all these expressions in the Catechism. They are the words of charitable supposition, and in no other sense can they be taken.

How anyone can fail to see this principle running through the Prayer-book

services, is one of those things which I fail to understand. It is quite certain that St. Paul wrote his epistle in the New Testament to the Churches upon this principle. He constantly addresses their members as “saints” and elect, and as having grace, and faith, and hope, and love, though it is evident that some of them had no grace at all! I am firmly convinced that the compilers of our Prayer-book drew up its services upon the same lines, the lines of charitable supposition; and it is on this principle alone that the book can be interpreted.

With this caution I close this paper on the English Liturgy. No one can value the book more than I do, and the longer I live the more I value it. But I warn my readers never to forget that one principle runs through it all. That principle is the principle that worshippers really are what they profess to be. On that principle the book is incomparable as a manual of public worship. And without that principle people are apt to draw from it mischievous lessons, which it was never meant to teach.