

PRAYER AND THE HOUSE OF GOD

"And dear to me the loud 'Amen,' Which echoes through the blest abode
-- Which swells, and sinks, then swells again, Dies on the walls -- but
lives with God! "

PRAYER stands related to places, times, occasions and circumstances. It has to do with God and with everything which is related to God, and it has an intimate and special relationship to His house. A church is a sacred place, set apart from all unhallowed and secular uses, for the worship of God. As worship is prayer, the house of God is a place set apart for worship. It is no common place; it is where God dwells, where He meets with His people, and He delights in the worship of His saints.

Prayer is always in place in the house of God. When prayer is a stranger there, then it ceases to be God's house at all. Our Lord put peculiar emphasis upon what the Church was when He cast out the buyers and sellers in the Temple, repeating the words from Isaiah, "It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer." He makes prayer preeminent, that which stands out above all else in the house of God. They, who sidetrack prayer or seek to minify it, and give it a secondary place, pervert the Church of God, and make it something less and other than it is ordained to be.

Prayer is perfectly at home in the house of God. It is no stranger, no mere guest; it belongs there. It has a peculiar affinity for the place, and has, moreover, a Divine right there, being set, therein, by Divine appointment and approval.

The inner chamber is a sacred place for personal worship. The house of God is a holy place for united worship. The prayer-closet is for individual prayer. The house of God is for mutual prayer, concerted prayer, united prayer. Yet even in the house of God, there is the element of private worship, since God's people are to worship Him and pray to Him, personally, even in public worship. The Church is for the united prayer of kindred, yet individual believers.

The life, power and glory of the Church is prayer. The life of its members is dependent on prayer and the presence of God is secured and retained by prayer. The very place is made sacred by its ministry. Without it, the Church is lifeless and powerless. Without it, even the building, itself, is nothing, more or other, than any other structure. Prayer converts even the bricks, and mortar, and lumber, into a sanctuary, a holy of holies, where the Shekinah dwells. It separates it, in spirit and in purpose from all other edifices. Prayer gives a peculiar sacredness to the building, sanctifies it, sets it apart for God, conserves it from all common and mundane affairs.

With prayer, though the house of God might be supposed to lack everything else, it becomes a Divine sanctuary. So the Tabernacle, moving about from place to place, became the holy of holies, because prayer was there. Without prayer the building may be costly, perfect in all its appointments, beautiful for situation and attractive to the eye, but it comes down to the human, with nothing Divine in it, and is on a level with all other buildings.

Without prayer, a church is like a body without spirit; it is a dead, inanimate thing. A church with prayer in it, has God in it. When prayer is set aside, God is outlawed. When prayer becomes an unfamiliar

exercise, then God Himself is a stranger there.

As God's house is a house of prayer, the Divine intention is that people should leave their homes and go to meet Him in His own house. The building is set apart for prayer especially, and as God has made special promise to meet His people there, it is their duty to go there, and for that specific end. Prayer should be the chief attraction for all spiritually minded church-goers. While it is conceded that the preaching of the Word has an important place in the house of God, yet prayer is its predominating, distinguishing feature. Not that all other places are sinful, or evil, in themselves or in their uses. But they are secular and human, having no special conception of God in them. The Church is, essentially, religious and Divine. The work belonging to other places is done without special reference to God. He is not specifically recognized, nor called upon. In the Church, however, God is acknowledged, and nothing is done without Him. Prayer is the one distinguishing mark of the house of God. As prayer distinguishes Christian from unchristian people, so prayer distinguishes God's house from all other houses. It is a place where faithful believers meet with their Lord.

As God's house is, preeminently, a house of prayer, prayer should enter into and underlie everything that is undertaken there. Prayer be longs to every sort of work appertaining to the Church of God. As God's house is a house where the business of praying is carried on, so is it a place where the business of making praying people out of prayerless people is done. The house of God is a Divine workshop, and there the work of prayer goes on. Or the house of God is a Divine schoolhouse, in which the lesson of prayer is taught; where men and women learn to pray, and where they are graduated, in the school of prayer.

Any church calling itself the house of God, and failing to magnify prayer; which does not put prayer in the forefront of its activities; which does not teach the great lesson of prayer, should change its teaching to conform to the Divine pattern or change the name of its building to something other than a house of prayer.

On an earlier page, we made reference to the finding of the Book of the Law of the Lord given to Moses. How long that book had been there, we do not know. But when tidings of its discovery were carried to Josiah, he rent his clothes and was greatly disturbed. He lamented the neglect of God's Word and saw, as a natural result, the iniquity which abounded throughout the land.

And then, Josiah thought of God, and commanded Hilkiah, the priest, to go and make inquiry of the Lord. Such neglect of the Word of the Law was too serious a matter to be treated lightly, and God must be enquired of, and repentance shown, by himself, and the nation:

"Go enquire of the Lord for me, and for them that are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book that is found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is poured out upon us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the Lord, to do after all that is written in this book."

But that was not all. Josiah was bent on promoting a revival of religion in his kingdom, so we find him gathering all the elders of Jerusalem and Judah together, for that purpose. When they had come together, the king went into the house of the Lord, and himself read in

all the words of the Book of the Covenant that was found in the house of the Lord.

With this righteous king, God's Word was of great importance. He esteemed it at its proper worth, and counted a knowledge of it to be of such grave importance, as to demand his consulting God in prayer about it, and to warrant the gathering together of the notables of his kingdom, so that they, together with himself, should be instructed out of God's Book concerning God's Law.

When Ezra, returned from Babylon, was seeking the reconstruction of his nation, the people, themselves, were alive to the situation, and, on one occasion, the priests, Levites and people assembled themselves together as one man before the water gate.

"And they spake unto Ezra the scribe, to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation, both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law."

This was Bible-reading Day in Judah -- a real revival of Scripture-study. The leaders read the law before the people, whose ears were keen to hear what God had to say to them out of the Book of the Law. But it was not only a Bible-reading day. It was a time when real preaching was done, as the following passage indicates:

"So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading."

Here then is the Scriptural definition of preaching. No better definition can be given. To read the Word of God distinctly -- to read it so that the people could hear and understand the words read; not to mumble out the words, nor read it in an undertone or with indistinctness, but boldly and clearly -- that was the method followed in Jerusalem, on this auspicious day. Moreover: the sense of the words was made clear in the meeting held before the water gate; the people were treated to a high type of expository preaching. That was true preaching -- preaching of a sort which is sorely needed, today, in order that God's Word may have due effect on the hearts of the people. This meeting in Jerusalem surely contains a lesson which all present-day preachers should learn and heed.

No one having any knowledge of the existing facts, will deny the comparative lack of expository preaching in the pulpit effort of today. And none, we should, at least, imagine, will do other than lament the lack. Topical preaching, polemical preaching, historical preaching, and other forms of sermoniac output have, one supposes, their rightful and opportune uses. But expository preaching -- the prayerful expounding of the Word of God is preaching that is preaching -- pulpit effort par excellence.

For its successful accomplishment, however, a preacher needs must be a man of prayer. For every hour spent in his study-chair, he will have to spend two upon his knees. For every hour he devotes to wrestling with an obscure passage of Holy Writ, he must have two in the which to be found wrestling with God. Prayer and preaching: preaching and prayer!

They cannot be separated. The ancient cry was: "To your tents, O Israel! "The modern cry should be: "To your knees, O preachers, to your knees!"