

## Standing at Prayer.

A change in the attitude from standing at prayer to sitting is not to be objected to simply because it is a change, but those who have introduced it may fairly be asked to state, as we believe they have not yet done, their reasons for altering a usage that has prevailed for many generations. In anticipation of a statement of these reasons we propose to bring to the notice of our readers some considerations which seem to us to vindicate forcibly the retention of the posture of standing, which was universally practised in our Presbyterian Churches till a few years ago.

Two postures during prayer are recommended by precept and example in Holy Scripture—namely, standing and kneeling. For instance, when Jehoshaphat set his face to seek the help of the Lord against his confederate enemies, he stood in the congregation of Judah and Jerusalem in the house of the Lord and prayed, while all Judah, who had gathered themselves together at his summons, stood with him before the Lord with their little ones, their wives, and their children (2 Chron. xx. 5-13). So in the time of Ezra, the Levites stood upon the stairs and cried unto the Lord, while the seed of Israel, who had separated themselves from the strange children, stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers (Neh. ix. 2-4). In the New Testament the publican is represented as standing while he offered his humble and acceptable petition, "God be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke xviii. 13). Moreover, Christ has distinctly recognised this posture as one for general adoption in His rule as to the spirit which must be cherished by us in prayer, "And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any" (Mark xi. 25). Kneeling, on the other hand, is yet more frequently referred to. Ezra fell upon his knees, and spread out his hands unto the Lord, when he prayed with confession of sins (Ezra ix. 5). Solomon apparently knelt during some part of the prayer which he offered at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings viii. 54). In the early days of the Christian Church Stephen knelt in his last prayer (Acts vii. 60); Peter knelt when he besought God for the life of Dorcas (Acts ix. 40); Paul knelt when he prayed with the Ephesian presbyters (Acts xx. 36). It is perfectly plain, from these instances, that both postures, standing and kneeling, are acceptable to God. And if this be the case, it surely cannot be right to neglect the use of either of them altogether. Now Presbyterians have herein—as in so many matters—followed more closely than some other Christians the guidance of Holy Scripture. They have adopted the posture of kneeling as the more frequent posture, the ordinary posture in family worship, and at their private devotions; whereas in congregational worship they have been accustomed to stand. Would it not be a serious mistake—to say the least of it—for them to give up standing at prayer in the congregation, and thus to abstain entirely, as Episcopalians probably do, from one of the two postures which are sanctioned by the authority of God?

Moreover, when we remember that it was the almost universal custom in the Church during the first few centuries of the Christian era to stand in public prayer on the Lord's Day, it certainly seems peculiarly appropriate that this very ancient usage should be retained by us. No doubt the practice of the early Church is not in all respects worthy of imitation, for corruptions of the simple Apostolic order soon crept in; but when an ancient practice is quite in harmony, as this is, with Scriptural precept and example, it has, we think, some legitimate claim on our regard. Two or three testimonials to this ancient custom may be cited here. Justin Martyr (Apol. i. 67), describing in the second century Christian worship, tells us that after Holy Scripture had been read and the minister had preached, "they all rose together and prayed." Augustine (Ep. 55 ad. Jan.) writes, "We pray standing, which is a sign of the resurrection." The last canon of the Oecumenical Council, held at Nicæa, 325 A.D., enjoins that prayers be offered to God by the worshippers standing on the Lord's Day, in order that all things may be observed with due uniformity in every parish. Irenæus, writing in the second century, traced the custom to an ordinance of the Apostles.

There is also a very practical reason for the continuance of our usual posture of standing. It is hardly possible, from the construction of the seats in our Churches, to kneel during prayer; and to render this posture possible, alterations involving considerable expense and inconvenience would have to be made.

There is, besides, a great tendency, where kneeling is the professed practice, as it is in Episcopalian congregations, to lounge, the worshippers half-sitting on the seats, and resting their heads and arms in a listless and drowsy fashion upon the desk in front of them. This posture is certainly uncomely and irreverent. Indeed, there is but slight difference, or none at all, between this lounging and sitting, which

attitude is largely practised by English Dissenters. We need hardly point out that there is not a vestige of authority for it in Holy Scripture. The only text we have seen quoted in favour of sitting is 2 Sam. vii. 18, where David is said to have "sat before the Lord." But the word (*yashav*) is improperly translated here: "Remained, tarried," is the proper rendering, as in Gen. xxiv. 55; xxix. 19, not sat. The custom of sitting before the Lord in the sanctuary, as the posture in prayer, cannot be deduced from Exod. xvii. 12, where Moses is compelled to sit from simple exhaustion (Keil and Delitzsch, Comment in loc.). Moreover, as Bingham says in his *Antiquities of the Christian Church* (xiii. i., 7), "It never had any allowance in the practice of the ancient Church. . . . The primitive Christians did never use or take sitting for a posture of devotion . . . because it looked more like an heathenish than a Christian practice." It is, in fact, a novelty of recent date, and probably very few, if any, will undertake seriously to defend it. We fear the adoption of it is due, in some measure, to the most erroneous notion—strange, indeed, and startling in a Protestant Church—that it is the duty of the people in public worship to listen to, and not to join with, the minister in supplication. To judge from the demeanour of many worshippers, this notion must be widely prevalent. We are all aware that one of the chief charges brought by the advocates of prescribed liturgies against Free Prayer is that the people cannot readily join in it; we know that the charge is unfounded, but we cannot profess to be greatly surprised at it, when we remember the irreverent appearance of not a few in most congregations during the time of public prayer. We have never seen anyone remain seated while leading the devotions of others; and we are very sure that the sitting members of a congregation would be amazed and even scandalised if their minister was to continue seated in the pulpit while offering the prayers of the Church. And this really settles the question. For if the sitting posture would be an indecency—and no one doubts that it would be—on the part of the minister, it must be precisely as great an indecency on the part of the congregation, who ought to be praying every whit as heartily as their leader. Let us, by our practice, contend against the Romish error, that the minister is nothing more than the intercessor for the people, and illustrate the Protestant truth that he is, in public worship, the mouth-piece of those whom Christ has made priests unto His Father.

As to the standing posture, we are not aware of any reasonable objection that can be brought against it. We know that it is said to be too fatiguing, but we cannot persuade ourselves that Christians of the present day are more feeble than those who worshipped standing in the early age of the Church—and, indeed, than the Christians of the last generation. We are sure that—with the exception of the old and infirm, who, of course, are expected neither to stand nor kneel beyond their ability—all the members of our congregations are quite able to stand without difficulty or discomfort for the few minutes during which prayer is offered. Public prayers are now, as a rule, by no means lengthy, nor is it desirable, from a Scriptural point of view, that they should be so. At all events, if ministers can and do invariably stand during the prayers, the reading of Scripture, and the sermon, we are persuaded that we are not making an unreasonable request when we entreat our congregations to associate themselves with them in a posture of becoming reverence during the few minutes of united prayer.

The only other objection that we have ever heard adduced is that by urging so earnestly the use of a particular posture we are in danger of lapsing into formalism, and perhaps, at last, into ritualism. It is well known, however, that those ministers who plead for standing in prayer are the very last to desire the introduction of the rites and practices of the English Church. It is most true that God looks not merely on outward appearances, but on the heart; and if the heart be not washed from its filthiness in the opened fountain, no acceptable prayer can proceed from it. But, at the same time, we do strenuously contend for the order and decency in worship enjoined by Christ's Apostle, and for the due external expression of that reverence and godly fear which is to be rendered to God in the assembly of His saints. We are confident that the Apostle Paul would say to the sitters and loungers at public prayer, "Judge in yourselves; is it comely to pray to God in such a posture? Doth not even nature teach you that you ought not to approach the throne of the King Eternal in an attitude which you would not dare to adopt in the presence of any earthly monarch." But if any seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the Churches of God." There is certainly no reason why we should apologise, as some of our brethren seem disposed to do, for our manner of worship, any more than for our form of doctrine and mode of ecclesiastical polity. We do not wish to speak boastfully, but we should be untrue to our convictions and unfaithful to our trust if we did not plainly declare that we believe our manner of worship to be incomparably more Scriptural than the Episcopalian manner. We heartily wish that other Christian Churches would join with us in following what we are persuaded is the Apostolic pattern.

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