

Standing at Prayer¹

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THERE is apparently a desire manifested just now by some ministers and congregations in the Presbyterian Churches to change the long-established posture of *standing* during prayer, for that which is customary in Episcopalian Churches, viz., kneeling. Of course, a change of this sort is not to be objected to simply because it is a change - we are not so rigidly conservative as to deny that a change is sometimes expedient, or even necessary - but those who wish to introduce it may fairly be asked to state, as we believe they have not yet done, their reasons for desiring to alter a usage which has prevailed for many generations.

We purpose, in anticipation of a statement of these reasons, to bring to the notice of our readers some considerations which seem to us to vindicate forcibly the retention of the posture of *standing* – a posture which was universally practised in our Presbyterian Churches till twenty or thirty years ago.

1. 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.)

¹ This paper is taken from Hick's "Life of Henry Bazely," well known as the Oxford Evangelist. The story of Bazely's religious life is one of the deepest interest. Son of a High Church clergyman of the Church of England, he was led in the providence of God to renounce Episcopalianism, and became a strong Presbyterian. He was strongly opposed to instrumental music and hymn singing in public worship. He laboured for many years as an evangelist in Oxford. Out of his own private means he built a Church there, that he might be enabled to conduct the public worship of God according to its true scriptural form. This Church can only be used by those who keep by the old ways in conducting public worship. It has been unused since Mr. Bazely's death in 1883.-D. B.

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 ought 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. 37.) Solomon knelt during some part of the prayer which he offered at the dedication of the temple. (I 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 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*.

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, it certainly seems peculiarly appropriate that this very ancient usage should be retained by us. No doubt the practise of the early Church is not, in all respects, worthy of imitation, for corruptions of the simple apostolical order soon crept in; but when an ancient practice is quite in harmony, as this is, with scriptural precept and example, it has some legitimate claim to our regard. Justin Martyr tells us that after Holy Scripture had been read and the minister preached, "*they all rose together and prayed.*" Augustine writes, "We pray standing, which is a sign of the resurrection." The Council of Nicea (325) enjoins that prayers be offered to God standing. . . .

We need hardly point out that there is not a vestige of authority for sitting. The only text we have ever seen quoted in favour of sitting is 2 Sam. vii. 18, where David is said to have "*sat* before the Lord." But the word *yashar* may be translated "remained" or "tarried," as in Gen. xxiv. 55. Moreover, the custom of *sitting* cannot be deduced from Exod. xvii. 12, where Moses is compelled to sit from simple exhaustion. Bingham, the great authority on Church antiquity says, "Sitting had never 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 a heathenish practice than a Christian."

We are all well 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 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.

It has been argued that laying stress on the posture at prayer is apt to lead us into formalism, but it is a notorious fact that those who advocate kneeling and sitting are the very parties who are seeking to assimilate our simple Presbyterian worship to the more elaborate Episcopalian order, and that they are the very parties who are introducing hymns, instruments of music, and other unscriptural innovations into our worship. While we ought never to forget that God looks not on the outward appearance, but the heart, still we would earnestly contend for the order and decency in worship enjoined by the Apostle Paul, and for the due external expression of that reverence and godly fear which is to be rendered unto 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 an earthly monarch? But if any seem to be contentions, we have no such custom, neither the churches of Christ."