

**THE PEOPLE IN CHURCH, THEIR
RIGHTS AND DUTIES IN
CONNECTION WITH THE POETRY
AND MUSIC OF THE BOOK OF
COMMON PRAYER**

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The People in Church, Their Rights and Duties in Connection with the Poetry and Music of the Book of Common Prayer by Iosiah Pittman

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IN CONNECTION WITH THE POETRY AND MUSIC OF

The Book of Common Prayer

BY IOSIAH PITTMAN

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THE PEOPLE IN CHURCH.

IT is a distinguishing peculiarity of the English Church that its Offices of worship are comprised in one volume, and that not a large one. Nor is it less remarkable that amongst the many books of its kind that were originated at the period of the Reformation, the English book is the only one that has maintained a permanent hold on the national mind. There are those of the present day who advance charges and objections; but the indulgence of this feeling, a periodical epidemic, has never exercised any abiding influence. That such charges and objections should ever have arisen is not a little singular; and the cause of them is well worthy of consideration.

In the first place, the Book is commonly called "the Prayer Book,"—a term rather strangely applied to a work of which the actual prayers therein may be gathered together in a few of its pages; for the great body of its contents are Odes and Songs, Canticles and Hymns, Creeds and Doxologies, the

Memoirs of our Saviour, as portrayed in the writings of the Evangelists and Apostles, and certain historical records of the Hebrew and Apostolic Churches.

In the second place, its contents, as in all other works of the kind, prove it to be a Book for music, whilst, in fact, there is not a note of music in it. Hence this discrepancy gives rise to very opposite opinions amongst those who only look at the surface of things. Some see in it the Alleluias, the Gloria Patris, Kyrie eleisons, the Agnus Dei, Misere-re nobis, and all those ancient outbursts of song which have for these 1500 years past soothed and gladdened the hearts of those who now rest in peace, awaiting the consummation of the great mystery in which we here live and breathe; whilst others see in the Allelulia nothing more than the Celebrant reading the words, **Praise ye the Lord**, and a Clerk and some unknown number of persons making the reply, **The Lord's name be praised**, and that in a manner which demonstrates little if any preconcerted arrangement between them. With the latter class the Doxologies, if sung, are left to the Quire, infant or otherwise, as the case may be; and with respect to many other of the responses, this class is of the peculiar opinion that such portions of the Service are of far too serious and solemn a character to be associated with music at all.

The Prayer Book has, then, its two distinct classes of adherents or admirers. Those who will sing the contents of the Book, and those who will read them. There is also a third class, and that a large one, who may be said to hold no opinion whatever

on these two questions. For, when attending the Cathedral, the Service there falls short in conveying to the mind a true portraiture of a common worship in song; and when in the Parish Church, the reading there of directions to praise,—commands to sing,—to sing in new songs, in joyful songs, in loud songs,—and hearing no songs whatever,—those of this class naturally withhold their assent to such a state of things by reason of its unreality and its opposition to facts.

But no just opinion of what is the right order of celebrating the poetical services of our Office Book (*poetical services*, for at least two-thirds of the Morning and Evening Offices consist of poetry) can be, or ought to be, drawn from any particular mode of celebration in use here or there. And before deciding upon what is the proper and natural exposition of our public offices, it is first necessary to ascertain if there be in worship any order and form of Divine appointment; and if so, whether the contents of our Book of public worship coincide with that order and form. Now, amid the various differences existing in our present modes of celebration, there is yet discernible a genuine and hearty endeavour to hold the truth, and realize as far as possible certain broad points, which may be considered as the first and original appointments and attributes of Divine worship.

The earliest records disclose four remarkable facts in connection with the worship of the true God, and these facts ought never to be allowed to escape observation. They are these: first, with respect to the

language of worship, the subject-matter, its highest form, is that of poetry. Secondly, with respect to the vehicle of that poetry, the manner of its utterance, its highest form, is that of music. Thirdly, with respect to the persons engaged as celebrants of that worship, none are exempt. It is a division of labour in which all are to unite—men, women, and children. And fourthly, with respect to the manner of their co-operation, they are to ANSWER each other. Now, if we look into the pages of our Book of Offices we shall find these four elements of national worship running throughout the length and breadth of the volume. There is the poetry—and no poetry in the world can approach it in sublimity, pathos, beauty, and grace. There is the constant and unceasing reference to music, although the actual song be not in so many apparent notes comprised in the Book. There is a clear recognition of the principle that all parties present are to join in the Service; and to realize this result, there are the facts of the appointment of some one to lead, as the Celebrant, and a Chorus or Quire to govern the answer or response. In places wherein are no such Chorus or Quire, there is found a Precentor or Clerk to sustain the *Vox precurrentis*, thereby effecting, as nearly as possible, something which shall stand as a living substitute for the higher fact.

The music of the Church is chiefly vocal music, and vocal music presupposes the existence and constant use of poetry. The harmony of numbers in sound owes its progress, in no small degree, to the

harmony of numbers in language. Song and verse have been married together from time immemorial, and it would be strange to find them divorced in the temple of their Creator. To bring man into the immediate presence of the Infinite Father of the Universe, God was pleased to make revelation of His will, and appoint certain definite acts which He required of man to do; and the earliest of these acts was that of sacrifice, the taking away of life; the holocaust, the destruction of the whole body. This order and form is supposed to be coeval with the time of our first parents, and of all worship it is the earliest. It must be presumed that man could not discover this rite, and that God did reveal it. There was an order of sacrificing which was pleasing to the ALMIGHTY, for such was that of Abel; and some other way which was not, and such was that of Cain. It is reasonable, then, to conclude there was a distinct revelation on the subject. It is admitted that in the Bible, with respect to this institution of sacrifice, no mention is made of its association with hymns and songs of praise; but we soon find poetry and music linked with these observances; and not only did the Hebrews bring together sacrifice and song, but in the most ancient systems of Paganism they appear together; and we know such Pagan observances are but corruptions of a purer and higher ceremonial existing in all probability even before the Hebrews were a nation. Sacrifice and song are found all over the known world; and it may be reasonably concluded there has been from the earliest times