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The Organ in Worship: A Sermon Delivered in the Main Street Christian Church, Lexington, Ky., May 11, 1889.

A. Fairhurst
THE ORGAN IN WORSHIP.

A SERMON.

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BY

PROF. A. FAIRHURST.

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"Let all things be done unto edifying," is the great law of worship laid down repeatedly in the New Testament. How much latitude is left to the human mind in worship? Prayer, and the singing of "spiritual songs" are universally recognized by us as parts of Christian worship, and preaching as a Christian work.

God might have prescribed certain prayers to be repeated by man, but he has not done this. In this most solemn service, in which the worshiper comes face to face with God and talks to him as a child to a father, no words are put into his mouth, no external form adhered to, no prescribed tone of voice required. The details as to prayer, praise and thanksgiving are left to the mind and heart of the individual worshiper, that his spiritual powers may be exercised and developed thereby.

It may be asked, is there not danger here? Yes. Many foolish prayers are offered, many petitions are made which, if answered, would prove to be a curse instead of a blessing. The danger in leaving the individual soul free in this matter is as nothing compared to that which would grow out of the detailed prescription of word, tone and action, whereby the human being would be converted into a mere machine, capable only of plodding through certain prescribed forms.

It is not to inform God of our needs that we pray, for our heavenly Father knoweth what things we have need of before we ask him, but it is for the good of the human soul to pray, although it is certain that it will often make mistakes while praying. Man grows spiritually by the full exercise of this privilege under the general direction of the Word of God. The great duty of the minister of the gospel is to preach Christ. In doing this, however, no two of the thousands of preachers among us ever proceed in detail alike, and the same preacher in different communities adapts his sermons to their different wants. The minister of the gospel does not feel himself restricted to the language of the New Testament in presenting Christ to the world. He feels under obligation to tax to the utmost his reason and his imagination in order to induce men to obey the gospel, and that the church may be edified. Among us he is expected to speak extemporaneously, thus giving the greatest freedom to the exercise of his powers. He does not confine himself to the figures of the New Testament, but gathers from his own imagination such figures and scenes as he thinks will edify his hearers, and he brings from his own experience the things that throb with life, that he may stir up the pure minds of his Christian auditors. Is it not dangerous for man to exercise these powers in the pulpit? Exceedingly dangerous. The foolish things that have been said in the pulpit by authorized preachers are beyond the power of man to number. Would it not therefore be much better for man to confine himself in preaching to the language of the New Testament? To require this would be to put the seal of death upon his noblest powers. Better is it to use the powers we have, make mistakes, and grow thereby, than to sit like parrots,
forever repeating certain prescribed forms of words.

The infant learns to walk only after many efforts and many hard falls. The soul of man walking toward God will often stumble and sometimes fall, but, if honest, it will arise with renewed strength and continue its upward march. Our mistakes, as well as our successes, become our teachers. The minister of the gospel in the exercise of the highest calling known to man, traverses heaven and earth and ocean's depths that he may gather treasures to lay at the feet of the Master. This is done at the expense of many mistakes, yet as a whole, the results are most fruitful in edifying the church.

A thousand details upon which the successful preaching of the gospel largely depends are left to be determined by the wisdom of man, and this, with the certainty that in so doing he will make many mistakes.

"Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." (Eph. v. 19). The spiritual songs here spoken of are not to be found in the Bible. We, as a people, believe that modern poets have written many spiritual songs, for we have gathered them together and bound them in the form of hymn books, and we have used them from week to week in our worship. The makers of these books have gathered songs from saints and sometimes from sinners, and from people of the most diverse religious views, from whom we, as a people, differ in very important doctrines. Yet we sing these songs, the products of a multitude of diversified minds and hearts, sing them unto the edification of the church, and ask no questions as to the soundness of the faith of their authors.

To us they are truly spiritual songs, wrought out of the truest and deepest experience of their authors' hearts, full of the life with which they have inspired them. It has been said that the writers of a nation's songs do most to form a nation's character. So the writers of songs for the church do most for the life of the church. The very words of these songs, to old and young alike, become common household property. They enter into that branch of worship, which, more than any other, leaves a definite and ineffaceable impression upon the mind and heart.

We travel up and down the ages, and through all nations, to obtain the songs for the Church of Christ. Wherever a true poet has sung something pure and good and holy, we marshal his song under the banner of Christ and label it "a spiritual song."

We, as a church, have used these songs almost exclusively, leaving out for the most part the singing of psalms and hymns, if by hymns is meant something found in the Bible. Thus, in laying the foundation for our church music, in selecting the very body and soul of which music itself is to be but the garment, we have exercised the widest possible liberty. We have not confined ourselves to the Bible, nor to any one nation, nor creed, and much less to poets of like faith with us. We have gladly accepted the songs written under every creed, and of unknown authors by the score, whose lives and characters we can never know, and all this to the edification of the saints. If there is one place where, more than another, we have been liberal in our interpretation of Scripture, it is in the selection of spiritual songs.

The mind of the church has been left free to determine for itself what songs are spiritual and what songs will edify. Is this not a dangerous power for men to exercise, and would it not be better, especially in these latter days, when men are no longer inspired, if the church would confine herself to the singing of psalms? We must acknowledge that very often a poor song is found in our hymn-books, and frequently a song is sung that is far from edifying. Who can record the mistakes that the people of God have made in these respects? In what manner can the spiritual songs be presented so as to make the best impression upon the minds of the hearers? "Let all things be done to edifying." The song is not presented for its own sake, nor to edify God, but to edify the hearers. The essential thing in music is to impress, as much as possible, the sentiment of the song upon the mind and heart of the worshiper.

To present the gospel of Christ so as to convert the sinner and edify the saint, is the work of the preacher, yet in doing this his elocution (the sounds of his voice) may be a
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most important element. Give the same discourse to two men. From the lips of the one with a magnificent voice, well cultivated, it will fall like magic; while from the lips of him who stammers and is slow of speech it will fall like lead. The difference is simply in the sounds they make. In the one case it is most edifying; while in the other it is wearisome. Yet God has ordained no particular style of elocution. The rule is, “let all things be done unto edifying.” If there should be a congregation some place which would prefer to hear the one who stammers and is slow of speech, then his speech will be edifying to that congregation and it ought to select him. There are certain regions where it is demanded of the preacher that he shall use the so-called “holy tones” in delivering his discourses. To these congregations such tones are edifying, and, consequently, scriptural.

God has ordained no particular tunes nor styles of singing. Singing which edifies one congregation may be repulsive to another. To the first it is scriptural, but to the second the same music is unscriptural. Edification is the Scriptural end to be gained. Here is a spiritual song. In what garb shall it be clothed in presenting it to the ears of the hearers so as to make it most edifying?

We have seen that in praying, preaching and in the selection of spiritual songs we, as a people, have allowed the widest and freest use of the human faculties. Matters of the highest interest have been left to be determined solely by human wisdom. God has trusted man in the amplest way, has required him to exercise his highest faculties to the utmost in matters that pertain to his soul’s highest interests. If he can trust man in the above things, can he not also trust him in the less important matter of presenting the songs so as to make them most edifying? Here is the song. Uttered with certain sounds it will edify, uttered with others it will not edify. The only question is, What sounds shall be used to accomplish the end? Does God care more for one sound than for another? I insist upon it that edification is the end to be gained by preaching and music, and by all worship. The matter of the sermon and the spiritual song are the materials for edification, while the elocution of the minister and the music are the means by which the sermon and the song are impressed upon the minds of the worshiper. If it is safe for the church to create and select the songs that she sings, it is also safe for her to select the music by which these songs shall be made effective in worship. If it is safe for her to create the song, the very soul of that which is to be clothed by music, it is also safe for her to select the music which is to clothe the song.

The objector to the organ may take either of several positions:

First, he may say that the use of the organ is not edifying, and it is therefore unscriptural.

Second, that it is unscriptural, and therefore it is not edifying.

Third, that it is edifying, but at the same time it is unscriptural, and therefore ought not to be used in worship.

The first objection is well taken, if it can be sustained. How shall a congregation determine whether the organ aids the vocal music unto edification or not? “Let all things be done unto edifying.” This rule throws upon the worshiper himself the responsibility of determining whether the different branches of the worship are edifying or not. God does not tell us that brother A preaches good sermons, nor that brother B sings well. We must determine these things for ourselves as individuals. If some members say that the organ is edifying to them, then we must accept their decision so far as they are concerned. If others say that the organ is not edifying to them, then we must accept their decision as to themselves. There is no other method whereby it is possible to tell what is most edifying. With regard to the votes cast in favor of the organ in worship, it will generally be found, I think, that the great majority of those who understand music are in favor of the organ. This fact goes to show that the organ will improve the quality of the music, for it must be admitted that those who understand music can best judge of its quality. The objection stated above is doubtless valid as to some congregations, but invalid as to others. Since each congregation must judge for itself as to what particular kind of music is edifying, and
since some congregations decide that the organ is edifying, while others decide that it is not edifying; to the first its use is scriptural, but to the second it would be unscriptural.

The second objection is that the use of the organ in worship is unscriptural, and therefore it can not edify. God might have selected certain tunes to be used in the church, but he did not, although tunes are of the greatest importance. He has left man to make spiritual songs and to make the tunes adapted to these songs. The general plan of all worship seems to be to give man as much to do as possible, to give his faculties the widest possible range in creating the worship.

Why is it that this matter of determining the quality of sounds by which a song of human origin, and a tune of human origin, shall be brought to the ears of the worshipers, should be made an exception to this general rule, and that we should believe that man has no authority to decide the question? Is it because sound is more sacred than the song itself, or than the tune by which it is to be rendered, that man has no right to choose the sounds that he thinks will best edify? Is it because the human ear is more likely to err in this than it is in deciding what style of delivery it prefers in a sermon? Or is it because God would be especially arbitrary in this matter and lay down a rule without reference to the highest wants of man?

I can not believe that God in this subordinate matter makes an exception to his general rule. His idea ever seems to be to develop through exercise and to the utmost every good faculty which man possesses. Open every avenue of the soul and let God come in. Let him come through the reason, the imagination, the memory, the conscience, the eye and the ear. Let the human ear, so often greeted by discordant sounds in daily strife, when it comes into the house of God, be greeted by the grandest and sweetest harmonies that human genius can produce, that the soul may be lifted up in anticipation of the celestial harmonies of the heavenly hosts around the throne.

"And I heard a voice from heaven as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder, and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps, and they sang as it were a new song before the throne" (Rev. xiv. 2, 3).

If instrumental music in worship is a sin on earth, is it not a sin in heaven? John, the beloved, in his old age, when his spiritual vision, free from all earthly dross, could pierce through the pearly gates, saw repeatedly the harpers harping upon their harps, and with an ear that could catch the spiritual sounds of heaven, he heard the music around the throne of God. How do you know that this language is figurative? May there not be spiritual harps in heaven? Are spirits deaf and dumb, and are there no divine sounds above? Is heaven an asylum for the deaf and dumb? God is not deaf. He who made the ear, can he not hear? But if it is a figure, would not the apostle have been very careful in that connection to have used a pure and appropriate figure? If it only edifies man, God is glorified thereby. It is man's salvation that God seeks. Repress not the human faculties in their growth, for this is not edification, but let every power of both body and mind in its most perfect form be made to praise God.

I repeat that the great idea with God, so far as worship is concerned, is to develop man, to edify him, which means to save him. In doing this he compels man to do all that it is possible for him to do. The very language which he uses in worship is a human invention, and when God speaks to man he speaks to him in human language. The most of the prayers that are offered are not "thus saith the Lord," are not quotations of Scripture, but they are formed by the mind of the worshiper. So far as their form is concerned, they are human, and the best that can be said of them is that they are scriptural only by inference.

Modern sermons are not in details scriptural either by precept or example. They are preached in languages which have originated since Christ and his apostles were on the earth. As a rule, they contain but few quotations of Scripture. There is so large a human element in sermons, that we can safely say that if they are scriptural at all, they are only so by inference. As to the spiritual songs which Christians sing, they are of human origin. Not a single one of them is found in the Scriptures. If they
are scriptural at all, it is not by precept or
example, but only by inference.

The tunes which Christians use are purely
human, and have been invented by musi-
cians of the most diversified views and
characters. If they are scriptural, they are
so only by inference. We are not familiar
with a single tune that the early Christians
used, nor do we know that they sang any
tune correctly. In preaching and praying,
we see how great is the human element,
while spiritual songs and tunes are wholly
human. Yet we believe that God adopts
these purely human songs and tunes as his
own, and they constitute one of the most,
if not actually the most efficient part of
worship. May we not be in danger of un-
derestimating the value of the human
element in matters of worship? God
has formulated for the human race
neither prayer, nor sermon, nor song,
nor tune. The reasons for this are appar-
ent. God adapts himself to human nature.
While man's general wants in all ages and
in all places are the same, yet in detail they
are most varied, and in nothing is this more
strikingly seen than in music. The music
which edified those early Christians may
not have been the music which will best
edify Christians to-day. The music which
edifies one congregation to-day may not
edify another.

God has ever trusted each succeeding
generation in every land to frame its own
prayers as dictated by the general spirit of
the Scriptures; to prepare and deliver its
own sermons by human wisdom, in the
light of the gospel; and to compose its own
songs and the tunes by which they are to
be rendered.

If he has thus trusted man in these large
and most important things, may he not also
trust that man will be able to render these
songs and tunes by the aid of sounds that
will make them edifying to himself? It is
for man's edification that all these things
are intended. It seems evident to me that
the general spirit of the Scriptures accord-
ing to the method of our interpretation as
a people justifies the use of the organ as an
aid to the human voice in worship.

It should be borne in mind that it is the
general opinion of those who understand
music that an instrument aids the voice in
singing. We all know that it is the habit

of singers, both in public and in private, to
use musical instruments for this purpose.
We are sometimes told that the organ is a
human invention. This is strictly true.
So were the last sermon and prayer which
you heard largely human inventions, and
the song and the tune wholly human in-
ventions. If we drop the human invention

element out of worship, then music of any
kind becomes totally impossible, and
prayer and preaching will be confined to
repeating certain passages of Scripture.
We are told that it is a dangerous
thing to use the organ in worship.
This is strictly true, but it is no more dan-
gerous than for men to pray and preach
and compose songs and tunes. Mistakes are fre-
quently in all of these matters. But God re-
quires us to act in these things in spite of the
certainty that we will make mistakes. I know
of no redemption for us unless his mercy
and love are sufficient. He who can make
the wrath of man to praise him can also en-
able us to rise on our mistakes as "stepping
stones . . . to higher things." They
are a necessary element in the education
of a finite creature.

A third position which the objector
might take is, that the organ may make the
music more edifying, but it is unscriptural,
and therefore ought not to be used. This
position is so out of harmony with God's
usual method of dealing with man, that it
hardly seems probable that any person
would assume it. That God would prohibit
that which edifies seems incredible. To
cast the good out of the kingdom would be
to divide the kingdom of truth against
itself. That this would be done where
every good influence is so much needed in
redeeming the world, I can not believe.

It will be noticed that I have viewed
this subject in its relation to edification.
He who simply asserts that the use of the
organ is unscriptural, and stops short with
this assertion, without considering its rela-
tion to edification, is in grave error. God
in all of his dealings with man, acts not ar-
bitrarily, but acts strictly with regard to
man's highest needs. He would lift man
up and redeem him through the exercise
of every good faculty with which he has
endowed him.

The deepest human reason, the loftiest
flights of the imagination, the eloquence of
the minister, the genius of the poet, the
divine instinct of the composer of music,
the voices of God's people and of the
musical instrument which helps to cement
the music into grander harmony, are all
God's means of redeeming the human soul.
Let us cast out no good thing from the
kingdom of God. Whatever will help to
redeem man is God's, and wherever it will
best accomplish its purpose of helping to
redeem man, there it belongs. God has
given to his people great and glorious lib­
erty—not liberty in name simply, but lib­
erty in fact. He has, by failing to formulate
the different acts of worship, thrown man as
much as possible upon his own resources,
thus calling into exercise all of his highest
powers, and lifting him up to a higher and
closer communion with himself. We, as a
people, have taken liberal views with regard
to worship. As to details, we recognize no
formulated methods of worship. Each con­
gregation is free to determine these matters
for itself. The great danger which lies be­
fore us as a people is not that we will abuse
our liberty in the matter of church music,
but that we may fail to avail ourselves of
the means which God has provided and is
ever providing for the spread of the gospel.
The Scriptures ought not to be so inter­
preted as to prevent us from laying hold of
and using any good thing that will help to
advance the kingdom of God. "But go ye
and learn what this meaneth, I desire mercy
and not sacrifice" is a text that needs to be
pondered long and well. God's word ought
not to be interpreted so as to prevent us
from doing good. Infidelity, the great foe
of Christianity in the present age, thirsty
for the blood of souls, stands knocking at
the gates of Zion. They who are within
the gates do greatly err it, in the presence
of this gigantic enemy, they waste their en­
ergies in civil strife.

It may not be inappropriate to add a
word as to what I think is to be the future
of the organ among us in worship. That it
has been steadily growing in favor with us
as a people is, I think, beyond question. I
can see no reason why it should cease to be­
come more and more popular in worship.
The root of this matter lies not in the
church, but in Christian homes where sons
and daughters, through long years of toil,
are taught instrumental music, and the
value of an instrument as an aid in singing.
The consequences of this are inevitable.
Better music at home means better music
in the church. Music is not an arbitrary
thing, but it has a definite mathematical
basis, which those who do not understand,
fail fully to appreciate. Many ears are so
constructed that to them a certain amount
of discord may not be unpleasant, while to
the more sensitive and cultivated ear the
same discord is very disagreeable.

The difficulty of creating good church
music is very great, and if a large majority
of those who best understand music, and
upon whom rests the responsibility of cre­
ing it, desire an organ as an aid to the voice,
it seems to me that their desire should have
great weight in determining the matter.
"Let all things be done unto edifying." For
hundreds of men, women and children, all
differing from each other in intelligence,
taste and education, to live together in a
congregation so that the highest spiritual
interests of each individual shall be ad­
vanced and the desires of each properly re­
spected, is a great problem.

In every human organization it becomes
necessary to sacrifice, to a certain extent,
individual desires to the general good.
Without concession of individual preference
in some measure, organized effort of every
kind becomes impossible. "Bear ye one
another's burdens and so fulfill the law of
Christ." "But the hour cometh, and now
is, when the true worshipers shall worship
the Father in spirit and in truth: for the
Father seeketh such to worship him."