

E-READ

The General Conference of the New Church **Articles and Letters**

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Neither Nostalgia Nor Lament!

by Revd Bruce Jarvis

“Worship patterns have changed considerably in the last quarter century or so, most notably in the virtual disappearance of liturgical-style worship in our denomination.”

A recent Sunday service at Seaburn Dene had as its theme “Worship”. Heather Taylor, leading us that morning, took us through various aspects of the theme: why we worship, and what constitutes genuine worship. All the usual elements we associate with collective worship were presented, together with the crucial teaching that real worship is enacted in the way we behave in our relationships and daily activities. Heather drew plentifully on the Heavenly Doctrines to guide our thinking. At one point we were asked to see if we could remember the constituent parts of the Decalogue or Ten Commandments, and the congregation was slightly

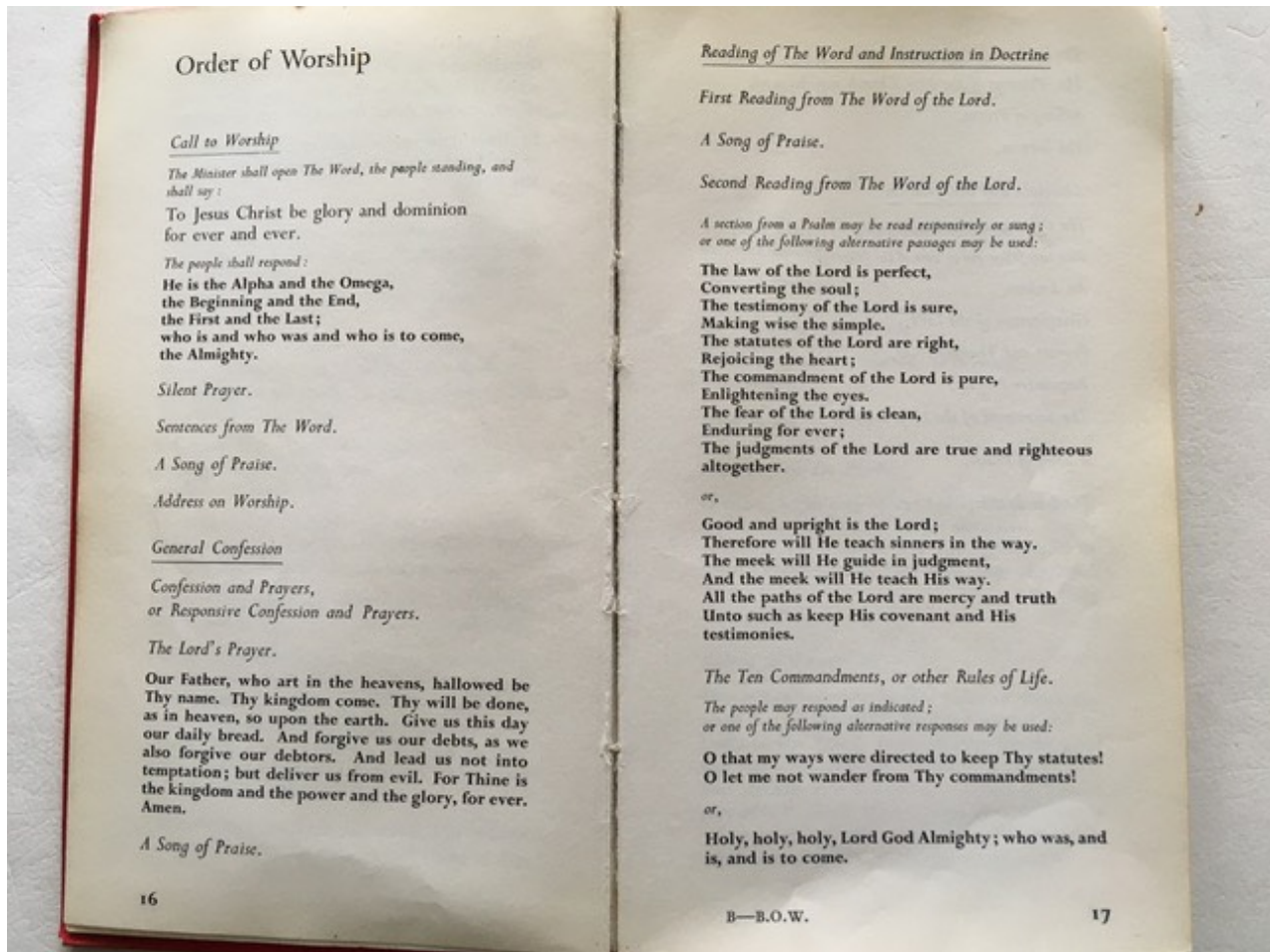
embarrassed to find the task harder than expected!

Liturgies

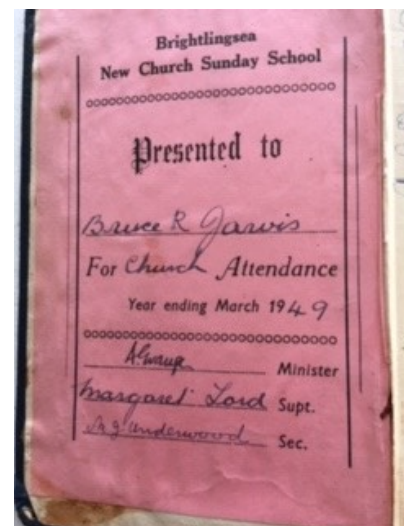
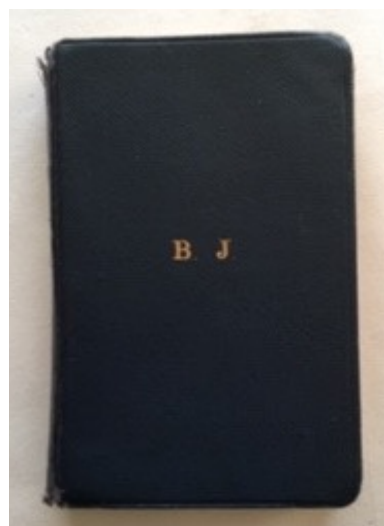
Now that set my mind reflecting on how much regular collective worship has changed in my lifetime. I’m of the generation whose Sunday worship was liturgical. That’s to say, the services published in the Liturgy for the New Church had a regular monthly pattern, with different morning and evening settings. After the opening of the Word, worship continued with sentences from the Word, and included prayers, hymns and a sermon.

During the service a number of other extracts from the Psalms and Prophets were sung or recited or listened. Morning services included the full version of the Ten

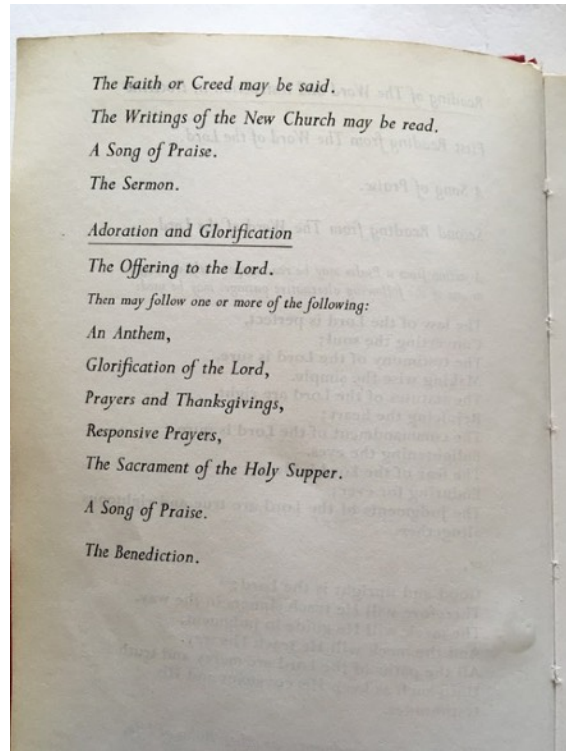
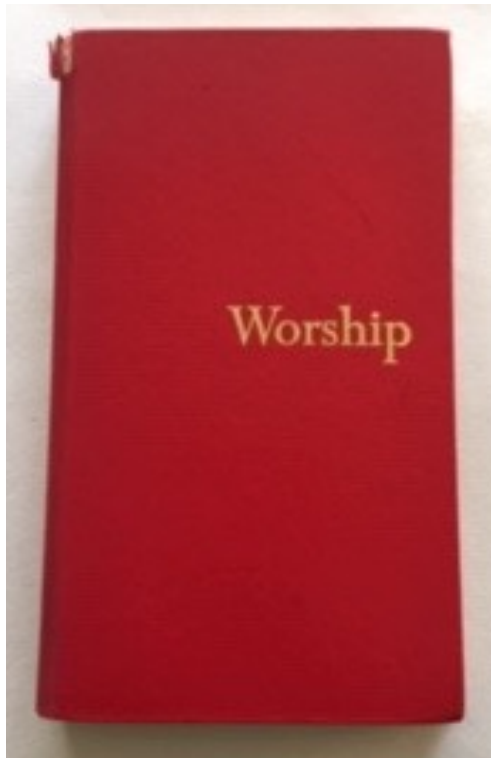
Commandments, and in the evening the Beatitudes were said. The Faith of the New Church or the New Church Creed were usually included.



My copy of the Liturgy was presented to me as a prize or reward for Church attendance when I was seven years old - complete with my initials in gold leaf on the cover. Pasted inside is a Sunday School slip, signed by the Minister and two of my aunts who were Sunday School teachers. Alongside the regular Sunday services, the Liturgy included worship material for festivals, sacraments and ceremonies, and Psalms and Chants set for congregational singing.



In 1972 the General Conference published an updated liturgy, called the Book of Worship, often known as the Red Book from the colour of its cover. It had much in common with its predecessor, a major difference being the use of a “new” translation of the Bible (the Revised Standard Version, 1952), and a more contemporary linguistic style in the prayers and addresses. It added several “rules of life” to the Ten Commandments and Beatitudes, and provided responsive formats.



Time moves very quickly, however, and I well remember a member of the committee which produced the revised liturgy telling me not very long after its publication that, had the Red Book been published a few years later, a more up-to-date translation of the Bible would have been used, and the remaining archaic pronouns in the prayers replaced with “you” and “we”.

Changes

Time moves on, and social and cultural norms seem to change ever more quickly. Worship patterns have changed considerably in the last quarter century or so, most notably in the virtual disappearance of liturgical-style worship in our denomination. There has been a move against formality and ritual in many spheres of life. It's all most intriguing, and one imagines social historians of the future will have much to ponder.

These thoughts were stirred by the service I mentioned at the outset. But something else had caught my attention a few days previously. An article in a recent *Church Times* (a Church of England weekly) had focussed on the declining knowledge of the Christian faith among young people. This observation is not especially new, and not confined to young people, but the writer, a modern languages teacher in a secular boys' school,

noted how this poverty compared with Jewish boys, who not only have a deep knowledge of their faith but also have a pride in their religious identity. In a largely secular age, there are nevertheless many people who hunger after a religious or spiritual belief, and are searching for opportunities to satisfy that need. The writer feels that the Church is failing both searchers and young people in not providing them with the materials to bridge the growing knowledge gap. *“Children’s Sunday School work that is craft-based and little more than an exercise in noise suppression is a wasted opportunity to teach Christian knowledge in ways which are age appropriate.”* Strong views, maybe controversial to some, but definitely thought-provoking.

What do we do?

As the heading to this article indicates, my intention is not to indulge in mere nostalgia. Nor is it to lament changing practices and styles. But the teaching we have on the laying down of essential foundations - the doctrine of remnant states - tells us that what we offer young people, and older ones who are on the journey, is so important, and something we should be aware of. I give thanks for what I received as a child and young person: the beauty and reverence of worshipping with others, the familiarity with passages of Scripture, with the commandments given us by our Lord, and the essence of our New Church teaching summarised in the Faith (True Christian Religion 3). I’m eternally grateful for the memories and familiarity with valuable passages of Scripture gained from regular worship from a very young age. All of it was complemented by Sunday School lessons, when knowledge and understanding of Biblical stories were lovingly imparted, and then by young people’s classes when we began to learn some of the key teachings of the New Church.

No, it’s not, certainly not, a matter of lapsing into nostalgia, or lamenting changes in style. More a reminder to ourselves of a basic requirement to teach the young, and of the long term benefits. We humans always need to be keeping an eye on the ball, looking to what is the essential function of the Church, and not simply following secular fashions and trends. Care is needed, so that in throwing out the bath water, we do not also throw out the baby!

As well as living a life of internal worship, while living in the world people ought to participate in external worship; for it is by external worship that internal things are aroused. Also, it is through external worship that external parts of our life are kept holy, allowing internal things to flow in. Furthermore, it is through external worship that a person takes in knowledge, and is prepared to receive celestial things. Without being aware of it, states of holiness are developed within the person. These states of holiness are preserved by the Lord for a person’s use in eternal life.

Heavenly Secrets 1618 (adapted)