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CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM
in the
Evangelical Churches

WITH DEFINITIONS OF
CHURCH TERMS AND USAGES

By
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With an Introduction by
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Illustrated by the Author

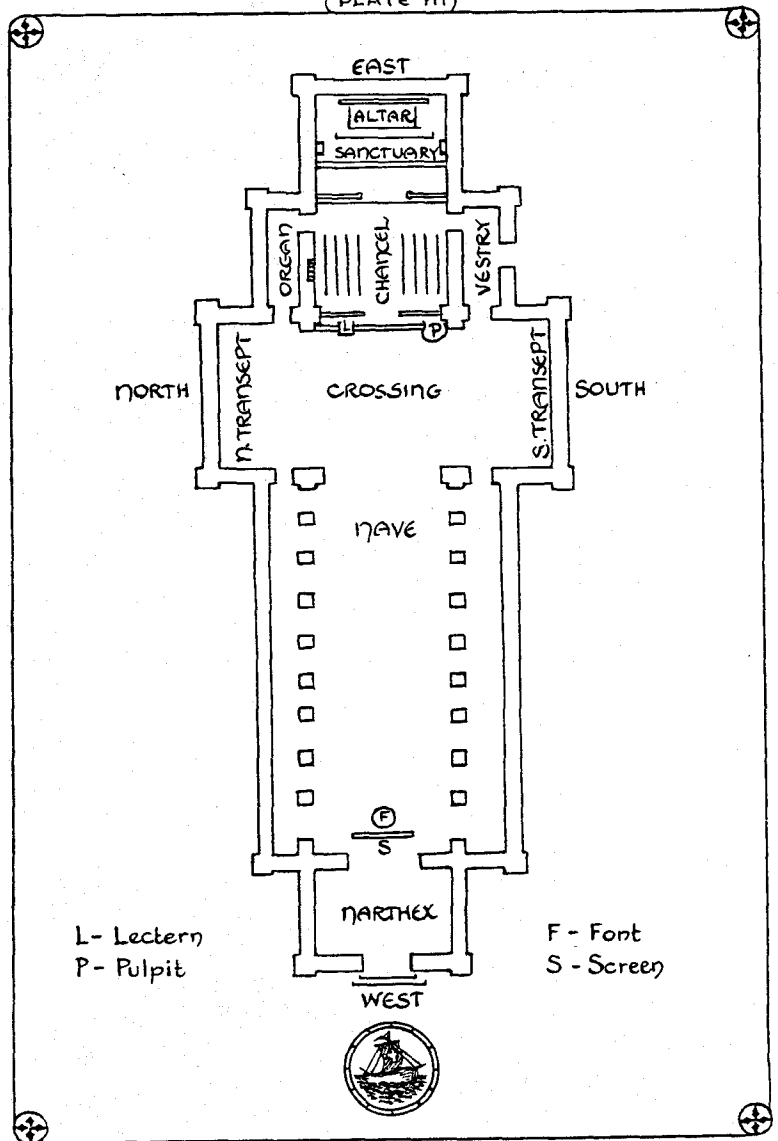
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New York • Nashville

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SYMBOLIC CHURCH PLAN
(CRUCIFORM)
(PLATE M)



L - Lectern
P - Pulpit

F - Font
S - Screen

which, when taken in reverse order, are the first letters of the word "left," thus giving the location of the "gospel-side" and, by inference, the "epistle-side."

In English parish churches, a heavy cross beam, known as a "rood beam," is often found at the place of separation of the chancel from the nave. The word "rood" is an early English form of the word "rod," and in its ecclesiastical meaning refers to the wooden cross which the beam bears at its center. Sometimes the beam is represented by an ironwork rood screen which serves the same purpose.

The sanctuary is the *sanctum*, or holy place, where the altar stands in the "east." Doubtless, the idea of the sanctuary and altar is derived, for the most part, from the structure of the Jewish temple. It should be emphasized also that Christian worship derives much of its character from the services of worship of temple and synagogue, especially the latter. Upon the altar, in the temple at Jerusalem, animal sacrifices were offered perennially on the Day of Atonement.⁴ By the altar, the people of Israel were reminded that ". . . apart from shedding of blood there is no remission."⁵

As Christ's death was the one full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for all subsequent time, a Christian altar is a perpetual reminder of the oblation of God's only-begotten Son and therefore, fittingly, a place where we, in gratitude, offer our "gifts" unto God: bread and wine to be sanctified for "remembrance" of the Savior's suf-

⁴ Lev. 16:29.

⁵ Heb. 9:22.

ferings and triumph; money to be consecrated to the building of the Kingdom which he ushered in; flowers in thanksgiving for the beauty of the world in which we live, and as memorial symbols of our departed loved ones, who have entered eternal life through Jesus Christ.

It would be quite in line with ancient Christian practice to place a communion table, instead of an altar, in the sanctuary. The New Testament mentions both.⁶ If a table is preferred, it should, of course, be centrally located like an altar. Either an altar or a communion table is to be treated as a means of worship and *never as an object of worship*.

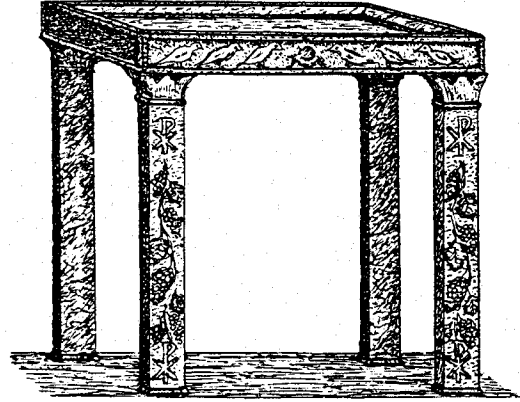
The early Christians in Rome celebrated Holy Communion frequently; and as it was sometimes celebrated secretly in the catacombs, it was not unusual to place "the elements" on or near a tomb, perhaps the tomb of some beloved martyr who had yielded up his life for the cause of Christ.⁷ This probably accounts for the origin of the so-called "tomb-altar," which is now the commonly accepted type.

The top of the altar is usually called the *Mensa*, or table, no doubt with reference to the early use of a table for the administration of the Lord's Supper. In liturgical churches, it is customary to incise five Greek crosses on the "Mensa," one at each of the four corners, and one, somewhat smaller than these, at the center. These crosses are emblematic of the five wounds in the

⁶ I Cor. 10:21; Heb. 13:10.

⁷ Saint Augustine mentions the practice of holding eucharistic services in the catacombs, and states that such a service was held when his mother's body was entombed. See Walter Lowrie, *Monuments of the Early Church*, The Macmillan Co., 1901, pp. 43, 44.

body of the Savior. At the back of the altar, in many cases, a retable or raised bench is set, and upon its center the cross is placed.⁸ Generally on the altar there are two candles in candlesticks, one on either side of the cross. These candles should be lighted during the admin-



A MARBLE MENSA OF THE FIFTH CENTURY

istration of the Lord's Supper. They signify the divine and the human nature of Christ; also, when lighted, they signify that he is "the Light of the World." The origin of this usage may be connected with the necessity of using candles at the secret celebrations of Holy Communion in the catacombs. Probably, at first, the candles had no other significance. Nevertheless, the symbolism connected with them is exalted and worthy of observance in all Christian churches, no matter how simple the form of worship.

Sometimes, during administration of the Lord's Supper in evangelical churches, one may see seven smaller

⁸ A well-proportioned altar looks better without a retable. The use of retables is of comparatively recent origin.

lights on each side of the cross, placed on upward-slanting seven-branched candlesticks. In this case, the lights are intended to signify "the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit." It is commonly accepted that there should be two candles only on the altar. An elaborate display of candles on an altar is not fitting in an evangelical church, except, perhaps, on festival occasions.

At the back of the altar, and rising above it, there is usually some kind of reredos, which may be more or less elaborate according to the means of the congregation. In many churches, the reredos is the most elaborately decorated part of the entire structure and often it is very rich in symbols. One frequently sees a curtain used in place of a reredos. This is called a dossal or dorsal (meaning back-piece). It is intended to heighten the effect of the altar, and should be planned with great care.

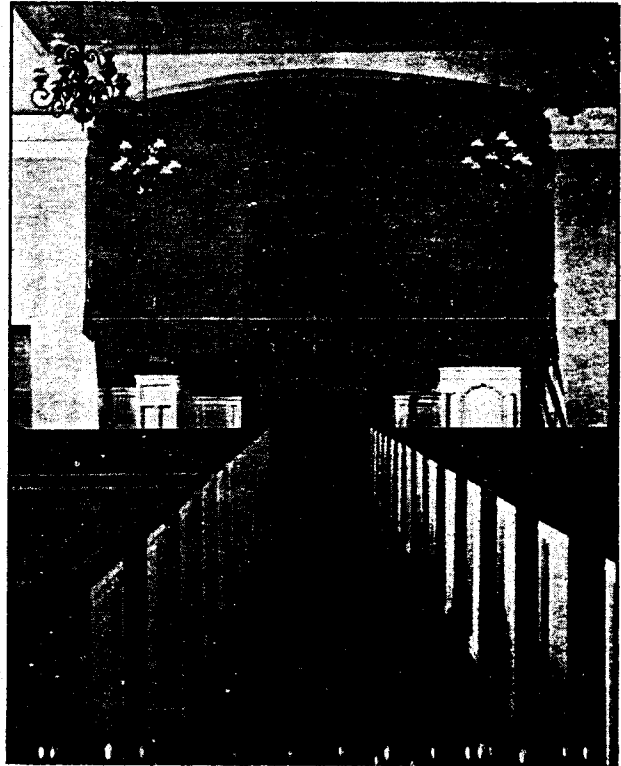
The flag of our country should not be placed inside the sanctuary proper, because its symbolism is primarily secular, but it should be placed close to the chancel rail in order to signify that we conceive of our citizenship according to religious principles. This should be emphasized by display of the Christian flag on the opposite side of the approach to the chancel.

Because, until recent years, these matters pertaining to the chancel and sanctuary have received only a slight degree of attention in non-liturgical churches, in the present transitional stage, the chancel and sanctuary are generally merged in one section" and, as a whole, called

" See illustrations of usage in evangelical churches in this chapter.

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the chancel. As a rule, this section is shorter than the corresponding space in the Gothic structures erected by the liturgical churches. There is nothing to criticize



Courtesy of E. F. Jansson, Architect

INTERIOR, BAPTIST CHURCH, YPSILANTI, MICHIGAN

This chancel has a reversible altar, on the front of which appear the words, "Love Never Faileth," and on the reverse, which is presented during Communion, "This Do in Remembrance of Me"

about the unified arrangement. After all, in evangelical churches, we do not attach sacerdotal significance to the acts of the minister during the administration of the Lord's Supper.

In the liturgical churches and in some non-liturgical churches, such as The Methodist Church, it is customary for the communicants to kneel at the chancel rail to receive the elements during Communion. In other non-liturgical churches, the communicants receive the elements sitting in the pews. It might be just as well if there were no visible barrier between the congregation and the chancel, but only a removable rail for the purpose of receiving the elements while communing. This arrangement would be significant of the typically evangelical idea that the priesthood of believers is universal and that there should be no sign of a separating bar between those who serve at the altar and the people. We profess to be "workers together" in all things, including worship.

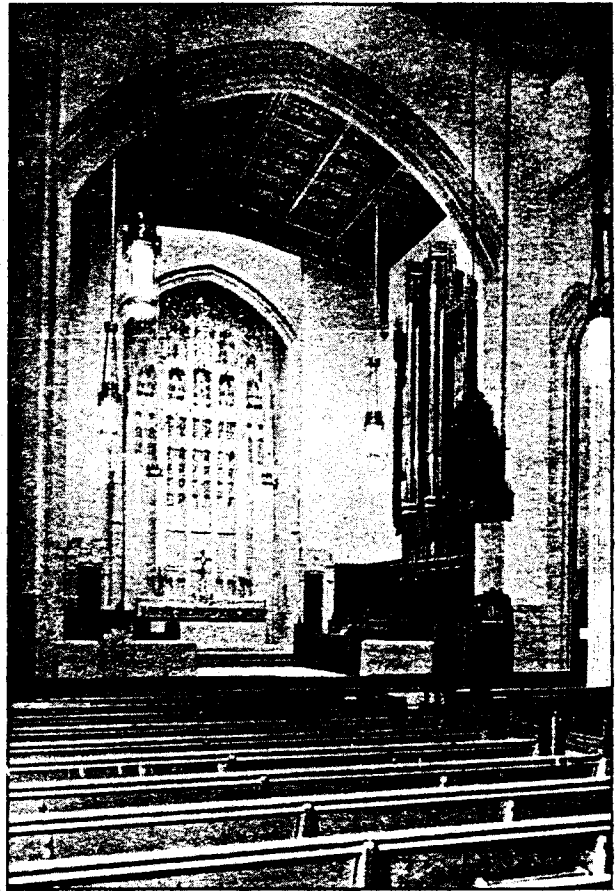
The structure, adornment and care of the altar was a major concern of the Hebrews.¹⁰ Because of its symbolic importance, surely a Christian altar should be well built, adorned worthily, and thoughtfully respected. An altar, or a communion table, with a cross upon it, and with unobstructed central approach to it, is a definite aid in promoting social worship—in drawing the thoughts of the congregation to a focus on the great fundamental fact of the Christian faith set forth in John 3:16. The symbolism of the cross is eloquent throughout the service, and its message is likely to go with the people as they depart from the church, whether the sermon has been notable or otherwise.¹¹

¹⁰ Exod. 35:25; 39.

¹¹ See remarks by Rollin H. Walker, "A Forgotten Truth," *The Modern Message of the Psalms*, Abingdon Press, 1938, p. 63.

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Moreover, if on a weekday, in response to the usual invitation displayed at the door, "Come in, Rest and Pray," one goes into a church and finds that the central



Courtesy of Dr. E. M. Conover
NAVE AND CHANCEL, TRINITY METHODIST CHURCH, ALBANY,
NEW YORK

object forward is a pulpit, supported by a regiment of organ pipes, the effect is scarcely worth the effort. There is no call into the realm of the spirit, and one

seldom or never sees an individual at prayer in such a church. On the other hand, if one beholds an altar and cross, no matter how plain, immediately the mind is drawn into contemplation of God's greatest gift to men.¹² The pulpit in the center raises a question mark, or leaves the mind cold; the altar and cross beget reverential humility, and put one in a mood to pray.

A good many altars are built too small to serve well during the celebration of the Lord's Supper, or to avoid the appearance of being overcrowded when vases of flowers and filled collection plates are placed there in addition to the cross and candlesticks.

An altar may be constructed fittingly of either wood or stone. In Catholic churches the top or "mensa" is always made of stone. It is well to employ a competent woodcarver or stonecutter to incise the symbolic decorations to be placed upon the surfaces of an altar. Perhaps the fewer of these decorations, the better, provided only that they be effectively executed. An IHS monogram, or an embellished Greek cross, in the center of the front will usually suffice as the major decoration. Any additional carving at the corners, or elsewhere, should be restrained in style. Intricate patterns and cryptic designs, displayed freely on the front of an altar tend to be distracting to the eye.

In case the altar has been constructed of very plain material, it may be advisable to cover the front with a colored cloth usually called a frontal. A white linen

¹² On the psychological reason for restoring the cross to its historic position in the sanctuary, see Andrew Blackwood, *The Fine Art of Public Worship*, Cokesbury Press, 1939, p. 93.

cloth is generally used to cover the Mensa and to this there may be attached a colored cloth, which may be allowed to hang over the front from five to eight inches deep, depending on the height of the altar. It is sometimes called a superfrontal, but the correct name is frontlet. The IHS monogram is generally embroidered on the center of the frontlet. In evangelical churches, it is frequently unadorned and therefore in harmony with evangelical simplicity. Perhaps a well-built altar of good material should be without front covering, except during the administration of the Lord's Supper.

One is likely to find a graded Latin altar cross in Protestant churches which have an altar. If it is small, it should be set on a retable, in order to give sufficient elevation. In non-liturgical churches, this cross is usually plain or, at the most, it contains only the figure of the *Agnus Dei*, or the IHS monogram in a circle placed at the middle of the transverse bar.

In evangelical churches, one very rarely sees a crucifix on the altar because the emphasis is on symbolizing the risen and glorified Lord rather than picturing the suffering of Christ. Perhaps, a lively imagination can supply as much thought of suffering as is needed to remind one of the Savior's agony, when one partakes of Holy Communion. Our forebears made up plenteously for the lack of an altar or crucifix in the church by constantly singing vivid hymns, such as "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins," a hymn which is realistic enough to satisfy the most ardent Catholic meditating on the death of Christ.

In support of Protestant reticence regarding the use of a crucifix portraying the suffering body of Christ on an altar instead of a plain cross, it should be observed that there is no proof that the use of a crucifix antedated the fifth century. Until the eleventh century, any representation of Christ on the cross was purely symbolic, the figure being always clothed, and generally robed and crowned as High Priest and King. The realistic picture-type of crucifix is of relatively late date. The obvious answer to the reproach of the late G. K. Chesterton, a convert to Roman Catholicism, about Protestants using a piece of cross-shaped wood or metal on an altar instead of using a crucifix, is that we prefer the earlier symbolical usage to the later realism.

True to its Arian drift, Gothic Christian art persistently fastened attention on the biological Jesus. In the northern European cathedrals, the figure of Jesus is generally portrayed as emaciated and tortured; not as a transfigured being, but one ostensibly defeated. Byzantine art was governed by a sounder instinct, which it expressed by magnifying the post-Calvary Christ, revealed as the Divine Word (Logos), glorified in fulfillment.

Those who favor the crucifix rather than the empty cross can quote Martin Luther, who said: "When I hear Christ preached, there is found in my heart, whether I choose it or not, the image of a Man hanging on a cross. . . . If now it be no sin, but rather good for me, to have an image of Christ in my heart, why should it be sin to have one in my eye?" "Let each man be fully as-

sured in his own mind."¹³ No hard and fast rule is necessary. However, it is proper that the prevailing preference in evangelical churches should be stated.

If a cross has been carved on the reredos, immediately above the altar, there should be no cross standing on the altar, but only two candles. The same rule applies to a carving in relief of "The Last Supper" or to any elaborate set of figures immediately above the altar (see illustration on page 125).¹⁴ In England, before the Reformation, altars were mostly without crosses. In the Church of Ireland (Episcopal), Canon Law does not permit the use of a cross on an altar.

Candlesticks and vases should be of the same material and finish as the cross. In addition to these, during the administration of the Lord's Supper, there may be placed upon the altar a metal stand for the Service Book containing the Ritual. Its front edge should be parallel to the edge of the altar.

Also, upon the altar, during the administration of Holy Communion, there should be "a fair linen cloth," sufficiently long to cover the top and drop over the ends of the Mensa or table-top, close to the floor. A white linen cloth cover for the elements should be provided and, if desired, some fitting emblem may be embroidered on it. Of course, this cover will remain in place until the minister is ready to proceed with the consecration of the elements.

¹³ Rom. 14:5.

¹⁴ Percy Dearmer, *The Parson's Handbook*, Oxford University Press, 1942, p. 86.

Two large candles, one on each side of the cross, should be kept burning during the administration of Holy Communion. When lighted, they proclaim that Christ is "the Light of the World." Why have them if they are not to be lighted at that time? ¹⁵ As a general rule, candles should not be longer than the candlesticks in which they are set and, in any case, the tops of the candles should be lower than the head of the cross. Candles towering above the cross are out of proportion and they inevitably spoil the total effect of an altar.

The very common use of individual communion cups today for administration of the wine raises a practical question regarding the method to be used by the minister in its consecration and distribution. An ingenious writer on the subject suggests that a sufficiently large chalice be used for consecration, and that it be shaped with a lip from which the liquid can be subsequently poured, either directly into the individual communion cups, or into vessels designed for the purpose of filling such cups. He also suggests that each communicant, in going to the altar rail, pick up a cup from a tray conveniently placed near by. After communing, it can be placed quietly in a suitable rack fastened at the back of the communion rail. The feasibility of such procedure will depend on the number to be served. Some time ago, the author assisted at a Communion Service in which more than eleven hundred persons communicated, and the method suggested would have been impracticable.

¹⁵ The old English Episcopalian Puritans scorned unlighted candles and observed: "the candles on our altars, most nonsensically stand unlighted, to signify what? the darkness of our noddles!"

In that case, the wine was consecrated in individual cups—the usual method, nowadays, in most evangelical churches. It is a radical departure from the ancient practice which has been abandoned with regret by many.

It is interesting to note that the method known as “intinction” is practiced in the famous Second Church of Newton, West Newton, Massachusetts (Congregationalist), described in a brochure entitled, “Our Church,” printed in 1926:¹⁶

The individual comes forward and kneels down and receives for himself the body and blood of the Lord. The method used is that of intinction. The minister dips the edge of each wafer in the wine. The communicant receives this in the hand and immediately raises it to the lips, as the minister says: “The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and be thankful.” This way of celebration emphasizes the individual’s part in the sacrament. Everyone has to rise, come up the chancel steps and receive individually among the kneeling row of communicants at the rail.

It should be noted that this method is used at early communion services when the number of communicants makes it practical. When Communion is held in connection with the regular Sunday service, the deacons distribute the “elements” to the communicants in the pews. The minister must devise the best method he can, in keeping with denominational tradition as well as local conditions and, above all, in keeping with the dignity and solemnity of this most significant service of divine worship.

¹⁶ Used by permission of Dr. Boynton Merrill, pastor.

It is customary to take up an offering for some worthy and appealing cause during the service of Holy Communion. This feature should be magnified and made specially significant; otherwise, it should be omitted. During Communion, as one looks on the Cross and thinks of Christ's great sacrifice, the moment and the emotion are peculiarly fitting for the making of a sacrificial gift for the poor, for missions, or some other great Christian enterprise. A small table, with collection plate, should be placed near the altar rail so that each communicant, in passing it, and just before kneeling, can deposit and consecrate his gift for Christ's sake.

It is fitting to state here that empty collection plates should never be permitted to stand upon the altar. While empty, they should be kept on a low shelf or table, preferably placed on the right side of the altar, as one faces it. In some churches, when the collection has been taken, it is customary to place quietly the contents of all the collection plates in one extra large plate. This is then carried to the altar by the person in charge of the collectors at the head of the return procession. Having arrived and arranged themselves as desired, the leader steps forward slightly in front of the others. The minister then receives the offering from him, and turning round, facing the altar, utters the appropriate prayer of dedication.

It is becoming that the prayer at the dedication of the offering should be simple, comprehensive and in keeping with the symbolism of the altar. For example:

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O God of love, in whom we live and move, and by whom each of us is known, we lay these gifts on thine altar, with due thanks. From thee has come all that we have and, by what we give back to thee, we are the more made rich. Bless, now, our gifts and, through their use in thy church, bring nigh the day when peace and love shall dwell in all the earth. In the Name of Christ, our Lord, we ask. Amen. -

As an alternative, the following might be used for dedication of the offering at a Communion Service:

O God, who didst give thine only-begotten Son to die on the cross that by his death men might be saved from their sins, with humble hearts, we here offer unto thee a part of that which thou hast given to us, and ask that our thought for those in need, and this act for love's sake may be blest in fruit that will bring praise to the Name of Christ. Amen.

Whatever the method used, it should be conducive to the dignity which is surely requisite in all actions at the altar.

The writer saw recently a picture of an extensively remodeled chancel containing a beautiful altar and reredos, but, lo! upon the center of the altar there appeared, not a cross, but a vase full of flowers badly arranged and, on both sides of the vase, a heap of empty collection plates, not even neatly piled. Would one be surprised if a hat and overcoat were also found on the altar, where such a mistaken idea of its proper use prevails? With or without an altar, a Communion Service can be made interesting and profoundly significant, or dull and repelling, according to the minister's attitude and capability. Increasingly, the congregations in evan-

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gical churches are asking that the Communion Service be treated as a vitally significant act of worship, worthy of thoughtful preparation on the part of both minister and people.



Courtesy of A. Frank Wickes

THE CHANCEL, UNIVERSITY PLACE CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
CHAMPAIGN, ILLINOIS

A Baptist minister, who has quite successfully specialized in making the Communion Service in his church memorable and impressive, has recently published a series of brief addresses and plans for such services that will

reward one for the time which is given to its perusal.¹⁷

In the introductory chapter, he says something quite significant regarding the use of ritual:

When a part of the Christian church began to resent the formalism and ritual of the program of worship, it established in the place of these a free, simple and relatively unadorned order of service. This movement was more than a revolt of the Protestants against the Catholic form of worship. It was the expression of a normal type of mind and personality. The plea for simplicity was at least as much a positive assertion as a negative one. However, those who would go to extreme limits of simplicity are definitely in the minority. We can quite understand that our age is socially conditioned to accept, with increasing favor, the very evident trend among churches toward an enhancement of the service. It is everywhere apparent that the pendulum is swinging back again toward ritualism. The progress may be slow; the direction is significant. This significance lies in the fact that the members of our churches are expressing themselves in favor of an enlargement of the ritual. This is not something originating with the clergy. Whatever the minister is doing about it is mainly in response to the suggestions and recommendations of his people.¹⁸

Wide observation confirms this judgment, and it is particularly true with regard to the Communion Service.

"Reverencing" the altar and genuflection towards it are practices rarely found and not likely soon to be seen in evangelical churches, nor is one likely to observe the making of the sign of the cross in them at any time during public worship. The lack of these practices is a negative sign of distinction likely to be evident for a long time. In a great many churches of the evangelical denominations, the members of the congregation no

¹⁷ Robert E. Keighton, *The Minister's Communion Service Book*, Judson Press, Philadelphia, 1940.

¹⁸ Used by permission of The American Baptist Publication Society, Philadelphia.

longer bow the head for a moment of individual prayer after entering church, nor do they kneel during the offering of prayer. *O tempora! O mores!* alas! that these two most excellent customs, so long practiced by our fathers, seem no longer to be in favor.

While we are on the subject of kneeling, let it be said that the lack of sufficient room between pews, as now ordinarily placed, discourages the practice, because seating capacity has been considered first. Perhaps, too, the Puritan aversion to kneeling still exerts a lingering influence that dies hard. Kneeling promotes a pervasive feeling of reverence. God can hear our sincerely uttered prayers in any posture, but the sense of humility symbolized by kneeling is conducive to the best attitude within ourselves.

Every church with a properly furnished altar should have an Altar Guild, which should act as a special committee in charge of matters connected with the care of the altar. The women in this organization should provide the elements used in Holy Communion, see that a stock of appropriate wax candles is kept in store, look after the linens and the paraments or ornamental hangings placed about the altar, pulpit and lectern, so that everything may be done "decently and in order" and nothing essential to good order overlooked. This organization should supervise the placing of flowers upon the altar and attend to the disposition of them after use.

The proper employments of an Altar Guild furnish opportunities for an important form of lay ministry, and wherever well organized the work of the Altar Guild

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is quite likely to be taken care of enthusiastically.

If the church is richly symbolical in its windows and furnishings, a subcommittee of the Altar Guild can be given charge of the pleasant duty of showing and explaining the symbols to strangers after the Sunday services. Such an organization might well devote some time, at its monthly meetings, to the study of some great Christian symbol. The minister could use some member of the Guild, who has specialized in such study, as an instructor in symbolism to children undergoing preparation for entry into church membership. In any case, the work of the Altar Guild will offer a delightful form of Christian service, which is bound to appeal specially to some of the elect ladies in the church. Appropriately to its work, the meetings of the Altar Guild should always begin and end with a brief devotional period.

While we are still concerned with the altar and chancel, we will deal with the use of vestments. Surpliced choirs are now quite common in most city churches and in a good many churches in country towns. The appearance of a surpliced choir is restful to the congregation. It avoids the undesirable distraction so often caused by variety of dress in the choir. It is a contribution to simplicity of effect and concentration on worship, both much to be desired. If a surpliced choir is desirable, why not a surpliced minister? In the present unresolved state of thinking, the logical answer in most cases is not likely to be given.

In most of the evangelical churches, the use of alb, chasuble and other vestments associated with priestly

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functions is not desired. It is said that these vestments, which are generally worn by the clergy in liturgical churches, are richly symbolical and that the use of them is supported by the twenty-eighth chapter of Exodus, in the second verse of which it is commanded: "Thou shalt make holy garments for Aaron thy brother, for glory and for beauty." Perhaps the characteristic symbolism associated with the eucharistic vestments is not, in itself, particularly objectionable. They are said to represent Christ's garments worn on Good Friday, before the crucifixion. Regarding the ordinary vestments, it is said that the cassock signifies devotion; the surplice, purity; the stole, Christ's yoke. An embroidered cope is significant of dignity of office, and so on. Any good dictionary can be consulted for further details, if wanted, and there will usually be found, close by, a group of illustrations. However, candor compels one to say that the symbolism of vestments is of comparatively late origin. It seems that most of these garments are, in fact, representative of the garments of a Roman gentleman of the third century or the early part of the fourth century. After the secular fashion changed, they were retained for ecclesiastical use. Writing of one of the most important of these, a distinguished Roman Catholic authority says that the chasuble is a secular vestment, which was elevated to the dignity of a liturgical vestment about the third century.¹⁹

In keeping with other characteristic attitudes assumed

¹⁹ See Cabrol and LeClercq, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, article "Chasuble," Vol. III. On the symbolism of vestments generally, see Walter Lowrie, *Monuments of the Early Church*, The Macmillan Co., 1901, pp. 384 ff.; *Catholic Encyclopedia*, article "Symbolism," by Herbert Thurston.