

# On Alterations in the Liturgy

by J.H. Newman

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of resisting changes to the Liturgy and maintaining Episcopal Authority in order to preserve the unity and stability of the Church.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:18, 1 Corinthians 1:10, Ephesians 4:3, 1 Timothy 6:3, Hebrews 13:17

**Topics:** "Liturgical Reform", "Church Unity"

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## Description

John Henry Newman delivers a sermon urging his audience to resist any alterations to the Liturgy, emphasizing the dangers of conceding even minor changes as it could lead to extensive alterations that may not be beneficial to all. He highlights the disagreements among individuals on what should be altered and the potential negative impact on the unity and reverence towards the Prayer Book. Newman warns against the unsettling of minds through constant criticism and the potential shift towards doctrinal alterations if immaterial changes are allowed. He also addresses concerns about the Burial Service and the importance of maintaining the Church's discipline and unity under Episcopal Authority.

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## Transcript

ATTEMPTS are making to get the Liturgy altered. My dear Brethren, I beseech you, consider with me, whether you ought not to resist the alteration of even one jot or tittle of it. Though you would in your own private judgments wish to have this or that phrase or arrangement amended, is this a time to concede one tittle?

Why do I say this? because, though most of you would wish some immaterial points altered, yet not many of you agree in those points, and not many of you agree what is and what is not immaterial. If all your respective emendations are taken, the alterations in the Services will be extensive; and though each will gain something he wishes, he will lose more from those alterations which he did not wish. Tell me, are the present imperfections (as they seem to each) of such a nature, and so many, that their removal will compensate for the recasting of much which each thinks to be no imperfection, or rather an excellence?

There are persons who wish the Marriage Service emended; there are others who would be indignant at the changes proposed. There are some who wish the Consecration Prayer in the Holy Sacrament to be what it was in King Edward's first book; there are others who think this would be an approach to Popery. There are some who wish the imprecatory Psalms omitted; there are others who would lament this omission as savouring of the shallow and detestable liberalism of the day. There are some who wish the Services shortened; there are others who think we should have far more Services, and more frequent

attendance at public worship than we have.

How few would be pleased by any given alterations; and how many pained!

But once begin altering, and there will be no reason or justice in stopping, till the criticisms of all parties are satisfied. Thus, will not the Liturgy be in the evil case described in the well-known story, of the picture subjected by the artist to the observations of passers-by? And, even to speak at present of comparatively immaterial alterations, I mean such as do not infringe upon the doctrines of the Prayer Book, will not it even with these be a changed book, and will not that new book be for certain an inconsistent one, the alterations being made, not on principle, but upon chance objections urged from various quarters?

But this is not all. A taste for criticism grows upon the mind. When we begin to examine and take to pieces, our judgment becomes perplexed, and our feelings unsettled. I do not know whether others feel this to the same extent, but for myself, I confess there are few parts of the Service that I could not disturb myself about, and feel fastidious at, if I allowed my mind in this abuse of reason. First, e.g. I might object to the opening sentences; "they are not evangelical enough; CHRIST is not mentioned in them; they are principally from the Old Testament." Then I should criticise the exhortation, as having too many words, and as antiquated in style. I might find it hard to speak against the Confession; but "the Absolution," it might be said, "is not strong enough; it is a mere declaration, not an announcement of pardon to those who have confessed." And so on.

Now I think this unsettling of the mind a frightful thing; both to ourselves, and more so to our flocks. They have long regarded the Prayer Book with reverence as the say of their faith and devotion. The weaker sort it will make sceptical; the better it will offend and pain. Take, e.g. an alteration which some have offered in the Creed, to omit or otherwise word the clause, "He descended into hell." Is it no comfort for mourners to be told that CHRIST Himself has been in that unseen state, or Paradise, which is the allotted place of sojourn for departed spirits? Is it not very easy to explain the ambiguous word, is it any great harm if it is misunderstood, and is it not very difficult to find any substitute for it in harmony with the composition of the Creed? I suspect we should find the best men in the number of those who would retain it as it is. On the other hand, will not the unstable learn from us the habit of criticising what they should never think of but as a divine voice supplied by the Church for their need?

But as regards ourselves, the Clergy, what will be the effect of this temper of innovation in us? We have the power to bring about changes in the Liturgy; shall we not exert it? Have we any security, if we once begin, that we shall ever end? Shall not we pass from non-essentials to essentials? And then, on looking back after the mischief is done, what excuse shall we be able to make for ourselves for having encouraged such proceedings at first? Were there grievous errors in the Prayer Book, something might be said for beginning, but who can point out any? cannot we very well bear things as they are? does any part of it seriously disquiet us? no--we have before now freely given our testimony to its accordance with Scripture.

But it may be said that "we must conciliate an outcry which is made; that some alteration is demanded." By whom? no one can tell who cries, or who can be conciliated. some of the laity, I suppose. Now consider this carefully. Who are these lay persons? Are they serious men, and are their consciences involuntarily hurt by the things they wish altered? Are they not rather the men you meet in company, worldly men, with little personal religion, of lax conversation and lax professed principles, who sometimes perhaps come to Church, and then are wearied and disgusted? Is it not so? You have been dining, perhaps, with a wealthy

neighbour, or fall in with this great Statesman, or that noble Landholder, who considers the Church two centuries behind the world, and expresses to you wonder that its enlightened members do nothing to improve it. And then you get ashamed, and are betrayed into admissions which sober reason disapproves. You consider, too, that it is a great pity so estimable or so influential a man should be disaffected to the Church; and you go away with a vague notion that something must be done to conciliate such persons. Is this to bear about you the solemn office of a GUIDE and TEACHER in Israel, or to follow a lead?

But consider what are the concessions which would conciliate such men. Would immaterial alterations? Do you really think they care one jot about the verbal or other changes which some recommend, and others are disposed to grant? whether "the unseen state" is substituted for "hell," "condemnation" for "damnation," or the order of Sunday Lessons is remodelled? No;--they dislike the doctrine of the Liturgy. These men of the world do not like the anathemas of the Athanasian Creed, and other such peculiarities of our Services. But even were the alterations, which would please them, small, are they the persons whom it is of use, whom it is becoming to conciliate by going out of our way?

I need not go on to speak against doctrinal alterations, because most thinking men are sufficiently averse to them. But, I earnestly beg you to consider whether we must not come to them if we once begin. For by altering immaterials, we merely raise without gratifying the desire of correcting; we excite the craving, but withhold the food. And it should be observed, that the changes called immaterial often contain in themselves the germ of some principle, of which they are thus the introduction:-- e.g. If we were to leave out the imprecatory Psalms, we certainly countenance the notion of the day, that love and love only is in the Gospel the character of ALMIGHTY GOD and the duty of regenerate man; whereas the Gospel, rightly understood, shows His Infinite Holiness and Justice as well as His Infinite Love; and it enjoins on men the duties of zeal towards Him, hatred of sin, and separation from sinners, as well as that of kindness and charity.

To the above observations it may be answered, that changes have formerly been made in the Services without leading to the issue I am predicting now; and therefore they may be safely made again. But, waving all other remarks in answer to this argument, is not this enough, viz. that there is peril? No one will deny that the rage of the day is for concession. Have we not already granted (political) points, without stopping the course of innovation? This is a fact. Now, is it worth while even to risk fearful changes merely to gain petty improvements, allowing those which are proposed to be such?

We know not what is to come upon us; but the writer for one will try so to acquit himself now, that if any irremediable calamity befalls the Church, he may not have to vex himself with the recollections of silence on his part and indifference, when he might have been up and alive. There was a time when he, as well as others, might feel the wish, or rather the temptation, of steering a middle course between parties; but if so, a more close attention to passing events has cured his infirmity. In a day like this there are but two sides, zeal and persecution, the Church and the world; and those who attempt to occupy the ground between them, at best will lose their labour, but probably will be drawn back to the latter. Be practical, I respectfully urge you; do not attempt impossibilities; sail not as if in pleasure boats upon a troubled sea. Not a word falls to the ground, in a time like this. Speculations about ecclesiastical improvements which might be innocent at other times, have a strength of mischief now. They are realized before he who utters them understands that he has committed himself.

Be prepared then for petitioning against any alterations in the Prayer Book which may be proposed. And, should you see that our Fathers the Bishops seem to countenance them, petition still. Petition them. They

will thank you for such a proceeding. They do not wish these alterations; but how can they resist them without the support of their Clergy? They consent to them, (if they do,) partly from the notion that they are thus pleasing you. Undeceive them. They will be rejoiced to hear that you are as unwilling to receive them as they are. However, if after all there be persons determined to allow some alterations, then let them quickly make up their minds \*how far\* they will go. They think it easier to draw the line elsewhere, than as things now exist. Let them point out the limit of their concessions now; and let them keep to it then; and, (if they can do this,) I will say that, though they are not as wise as they might have been, they are at least firm, and have at last come right.

## THE BURIAL SERVICE

We hear many complaints about the Burial Service, as unsuitable for the use for which it was intended. It expresses a hope, that the person departed, over whom it is read, will be saved; and this is said to be dangerous when expressed about all who are called Christians, as leading the laity to low views of the spiritual attainments necessary for salvation; and distressing the Clergy who have to read it.

Now I do not deny, I frankly own, it is sometimes distressing to use the Service; but this it must ever be in the nature of things; wherever you draw the line. Do you pretend you can discriminate the wheat from the tares? of course not.

It is often distressing to use this Service, because it is often distressing to think of the dead at all; not that you are without hope, but because you have fear also.

How many are there whom you know well enough to dare to give any judgment about? Is a Clergyman only to express a hope where he has grounds for having it? Are not the feelings of relatives to be considered? And may there not be a difference of judgments? I may hope more, another less. If each is to use the precise words which suit his own judgment, then we can have no words at all.

But it may be said, "every thing of a personal nature may be left out from the service." And do you really wish this? Is this the way in which your flock will wish their lost friends to be treated? a cold "edification," but no affectionate valediction to the departed? Why not pursue this course of (supposed) improvement, and advocate the omission of the Service altogether?

Are we to have no kind and religious thoughts over the good, lest we should include the bad?

But it will be said, that, at least we ought not to read the Service over the flagrantly wicked; over those who are a scandal to religion. but this is a very different position. I agree with it entirely. Of course we should not do so, and truly the Church never meant we should. She never wished we should profess our hope of the salvation of habitual drunkards and swearers, open sinners, blasphemers, and the like; not as daring to despair of their salvation, but thinking it unseemly to honour their memory. Though the Church is not endowed with a power of absolute judgment upon individuals, yet she is directed to decide according to external indications, in order to hold up the rules of GOD'S governance, and afford a type of it, and an assistance towards the realizing it. As she denies to the scandalously wicked the LORD'S Supper, so does she deprive them of her other privileges.

The Church, I say, does not bid us read the Service over open sinners. Hear her own words introducing the Service. "The office ensuing is not to be used for any that die unbaptized, or excommunicate, or have laid violent hands upon themselves." There is no room to doubt whom she meant to be excommunicated,

open sinners. Those therefore who are pained at the general use of the Service, should rather strive to restore the practice of excommunication, than to alter the words used in the Service. Surely, if we do not this, we are clearly defrauding the religious, for the sake of keeping close to the wicked.

Here we see the common course of things in the world. We omit a duty. In consequence our services become inconsistent. Instead of retracing our steps we alter the Service. What is this but, as it were, to sin upon principle? While we keep to our principles, our sins are inconsistencies; at length, sensitive of the absurdity which inconsistency involves, we accommodate our professions to our practice. This is ever the way of the world; but it should not be the way of the Church.

I will join heart and hand with any who will struggle for a restoration of that "godly discipline," the restoration of which our Church publicly professes she considers desirable; but GOD forbid any one should so depart from her spirit, as to mould her formularies to fit the case of deliberate sinners! And is not this what we are plainly doing, if we alter the Burial Service as proposed? we are recognizing the right of men to receive Christian Burial, about whom we do not like to express a hope. Why should they have Christian burial at all?

It will be said that the restoration of the practice of Excommunication is impracticable; and that therefore the other alternative must be taken, as the only one open to us. Of course it is impossible, if no one attempts to restore it; but if all willed it, how would it be impossible; and if no one stirs because he thinks no one else will, he is arguing in a circle.

But, after all, what have we to do with probabilities and prospects in matters of plain duty? Were a man the only member of the Church who felt it a duty to return to the Ancient Discipline, yet a duty is a duty, though he be alone. It is one of the great sins of our times to look to consequences in matters of plain duty. Is not this such a case? If not, prove that it is not; but do not argue from consequences. In the mean while I offer the following texts in evidence of the duty. Matth. xviii. 15-17. Rom. xvi.17. 1 Cor. v. 7-13. 2 Thess. iii. 6,14,15. 2 Tim. iii.5. Tit. 10,11. 2 John 10,11.

#### THE PRINCIPLE OF UNITY.

Testimony of St. Clement, the associate of St. Paul, (Phil. iv. 3.) to the Apostolical Succession.

The Apostles knew, through our LORD JESUS CHRIST, that strife would arise for the Episcopate. Wherefore having received an accurate foreknowledge, they appointed the men I before mentioned, and have given an orderly succession, that on their death other approved men might receive in turn their office. Ep. i. 44.

Testimony of St. Ignatius, the friend of St. Peter, to the Episcopacy.

Your celebrated Presbytery, worthy of GOD, is closely knit to the Bishop, as the strings to a harp, and so by means of your unanimity and concordant love JESUS CHRIST is sung. Eph. 4. There are those who profess to acknowledge a Bishop, but do every thing without him. Such men appear to lack a clear conscience. Magn. 4. He for whom I am bound is my witness that I have not learned this doctrine from mortal men. The Spirit proclaimed to me these words: "Without the Bishop do nothing." Phil. 7.

With these and other such strong passages in the Apostolical Fathers, how can we permit ourselves in our present practical disregard of the Episcopal Authority? Are not we apt to obey only so far as the law obliges us? Do we support the Bishop, and strive to move all together with him as our bond of union and

head; or is not our everyday conduct as if, except with respect to certain periodical forms and customs, we were each independent in his own parish?

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