THE CONGREGATIONAL AMEN.

A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE

CLARENDON STREET CHURCH, BOSTON,

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Text missing
"And all the people said Amen." — 1 Chron. xiv. 36.

We have in these words a delightful glimpse of a worshipping congregation. Our modern religious assemblies have acquired the most fitting name of "audiences," since it has become their sole employment to hear. But whatever title may have been given to the early Jewish and Christian congregations, their character is clearly seen. They were not dumb-waiters, tarrying in silence to be filled with the provisions of God's house. They were worshippers, who spake as well as heard; who answered the Lord when he addressed them by the mouth of his servants, as well as listened reverently to his message. And though the Jewish service was far more exclusive and ministerial than ours in theory professes to be, being priestly and not popular, yet we find all through it traces of congregational responses and participations.

In the instance which is brought before us in the text, we have a striking illustration of this. A psalm of David had just been recited. It was a prayer of thanksgiving, set to music. It was a joyful, fervid rehearsal of the Lord's merciful dealings with his people. It began with a thanksgiving, and ended with a doxology. And when the closing strains fell upon the ear,— "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for ever and ever,;"— the words dropped not into a stagnant silence, which gave back no ripple of response, no answering echo of accord, but into a spirit of worship which was
as resonant as a mountain atmosphere, and out of which "all the people said Amen, and praised the Lord."

It is my purpose in this discourse to consider Jewish and Christian uses of the Amen.

I. The meaning and uses of the word Amen as employed in the Jewish service.

It is a Hebrew term, consisting of three letters, which the Jews read acrostically, thus, "Al, Melek, Neman," — "God is a trustworthy King."

Used in response to some word or promise of God, it was, therefore, in the first place, a confession of faith. As uttered by the worshipper, it simply avowed confidence in the word and promise and covenant of the Lord. I may say it was a symbol or monogram of faith, — a confession of trust put into the most brief and concrete form.

All ordinances of worship, if you will think of it, are condensed and abbreviated expressions of assent to Christian truth. Baptism gathers up the doctrine of the cross and resurrection into a compact symbol for sealing our consent to the declaration of God, that Jesus Christ was "crucified for our offences and raised again for our justification." The Lord's Supper is an enacted consent to the doctrine of the sufferings of Christ, and the glory which is to follow, — a sacramental amen, uttered by the elements of bread and wine. And so of all true acts of worship; they are not overtures of ours to God, but "the answer of a good conscience," on our part, to what God has said. They are declarations of faith; and faith is not the believer's covenant with Christ, but his ratification of Christ's covenant with him, which has been written in the blood of the cross. And so a Christian "Amen" is faith's indorsement of
the truth of God. "He that hath received his testimony, hath set to his seal that God is true."

Go back to the Jewish service, and see how significant this term was to the true Israelite. Accompany him to the holy place. There he is, kneeling reverently before the altar, confessing his sins, and owning his powerlessness to atone for a single one of his offences. Then the priest points him to the mercy-seat, sprinkled with blood, telling by that crimson signature that the offering for his guilt has been made, and that, therefore, God pronounces his sins remitted, and his iniquities forgiven. Beholding this, he falls prostrate on his face before the mercy-seat, and worships God; and then, as the strains of praise break forth from the lips of the mediator between Jehovah and himself, he replies, with a word into which all the trust and assurance and adoration of his soul is compressed, "Amen." "God is faithful and he will perform it." Would his worship have been complete without that "Amen"? Nay: no more than your business-contract would be complete without your signature. It was faith's seal, set to the covenant of God, without which Jehovah would have been robbed of his honor, and the worshipper defrauded of his peace of conscience.

Again, the amen was an expression of prayer. When the words of petition were uttered, if the people could not repeat them verbatim, they could epitomize them in one brief expression that took into itself the spirit and meaning of the whole petition. It was like the offerings of the husbandman. The whole golden harvest could not be taken into the temple and presented before the Lord; but a sheaf, which stood for the whole,
could be taken. And so the amen was the wave-sheaf of the whole prayer offered up by each worshipper before Jehovah. It does not follow, therefore, that in order for one to unite in the public supplications of God's house, he must say all the words with the minister, though this might be a help to devotion if it were possible. A single expression of indorsement is enough. Another can write your check for you, but your signature must be put to it before it is valid. And the pious Jew seems to have thought it absolutely necessary to set his audible amen to the prayer of the minister, in order to make it his own.

Now, if you will think of it, all the offices of the Christian ministry are simply representative. As in the Hebrew ministry, "Every high priest was taken from among men" to make intercession for men; so in the Christian, every pastor is taken out from among the church, to conduct their service, not to perform his own. He ministers for the people, and not simply to the people. When he preaches, he takes God's word, and unfolds and explains it to them. But when he prays, he simply voices their desires, and gathers up, so far as possible, their needs and their confessions, and presents them before the Lord. As preacher, it is not a commendation of his words that he needs to hear, but the strong and confident "Amen," — "That is true," "The testimony of the Lord is sure," and "All the promises of God in him are yea, and in him amen, to the glory of God." But when he prays, he wants to hear the people owning and honoring their own prayers, and indorsing them with their personal and hearty "Amen!" "Be it so!" How it seems to strengthen and fortify the prayer when all the people say Amen!
It is like the *viva voce* vote in the assembly, where unanimous assent is given to your motion. It is not simply a multiplication of voices, but an aggregation of minds upon a single point. The intercessor with God seems to hear in it the rush of a multitude of hearts, massing their desires, and sweeping up at the end of the petition to re-enforce his solitary prayer and help it storm the gates of grace.

The minister, who is truly devout and sensitive to the spiritual temper of his people, will be able indeed to feel their silent unison of heart with him, and to be strengthened by the companionship of their unspoken desires. But words intensify feelings, and speech gives power of touch and contact to sympathy. To know, by subtle intuition, when you pray, that faithful souls are pressing round you to second your desires and swell the volume of your intercessions, is a blessed thing. But to be assured of this by the audible response of a multitude of voices, is wonderfully strengthening. Yet, from the unhappy custom into which worshippers have so largely fallen of listening to the public supplications, instead of joining in them, how often is the minister compelled to say to himself, after struggling in the pangs of unattended prayer, “I have trodden the wine-press alone; and of the people there was none with me.”

How the habit of uniting mentally in the public prayer tends instinctively to the audible utterance which I have mentioned! When desire is active, and feeling rises to its highest pitch, there is an irresistible pressure on the flood-gates of speech, and the final response becomes a necessity for relieving the pent-up burden of devout emotion. And then what power
there is in the Amen! Compress the fervor and feeling of a half-hour's prayer into a single word, and it is like the charged projectile, swift and powerful, and instant in execution. Have you not heard an amen that has gone far deeper into your soul than the prolonged petition that preceded it: it was so surcharged with condensed and burning emotion? Brevity is often the soul of eloquence. And as the powder that flashes harmlessly into the air, when unconfined, has resistless energy when all its force is pent up and put behind a minie ball, so the amen that packs the prayer of myriad words into a single vocabable, may strike quicker and go deeper than the prayer itself could do.

And there was still another use of the amen in the Hebrew worship. It was employed for self-conviction under the rebukes of God's law.

In our silent service, it is very easy to evade reproof and give the go-by to the searching accusations of the truth. In the worship which God instituted, men were made to face correction, and give audible assent to the detailed and specific charges of the law. Let me give you a specimen of the directions which Moses laid upon the people.

"And the Levites shall speak, and say unto the men of Israel with a loud voice,

"Cursed be the man that maketh any graven or molten image, an abomination unto the Lord, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and putteth it in a secret place. And all the people shall answer and say, Amen.

"Cursed be he that setteth light by his father or his mother. And all the people shall say, Amen.

"Cursed be he that removeth his neighbour's landmark. And all the people shall say, Amen."
“Cursed be he that maketh the blind to wander out of the way. And all the people shall say, Amen.”

How this kind of worship drove transgressors to the wall! It compelled them to convict themselves, and ratify their own condemnation. The wayward and unfilial son could not hide behind a non-committal silence, as the minister said, “Cursed be he that setteth light by his father or his mother.” He must say amen, and thus vote for his own conviction, and sign his own anathema.

Now, I think there would be no quicker way to poll the house in a modern congregation, than to require all the people to say amen to what they heard. You would find some who would beg to be excused when the words, “He that believeth not is condemned already” were pronounced. And you would find that some would confess to a silent, stubborn nay! rising up within them when the minister said, “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema, Maranatha.”

Well, it is not the method of Christian worship to exact such confession from unwilling hearts. Its service is voluntary, not enjoined; spontaneous, not compulsory. But how good were it to hear Christians say amen under the righteous accusations of truth! “Confess your faults one to another,” is the commandment of the gospel. We may put our confession in our own words, or we may give public consent to the words of God. And when he says, “Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation,” how well were it for us if we would stand up and take upon our lips the self-condemning amen, because we are guilty in respect to our “tithes and offer-
ings," and ought humbly and openly to own it. And then might we with double joy give the amen of faith, as we heard the blessed words of atoning grace, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us."

Oh, brethren, we are not responsive enough under the threatenings and the promises, the benedictions and anathemas of the gospel! If our hearts were filled with the spirit, they would be as vibrant to the touch of truth as the musician's harp to his fingers. And then, under God’s accusations, their amen would be a note of contrition that would awake all about us to the dreadful reality of sin; and, under his promises, a strain of gladness that would thrill the whole body of believers with thanksgiving to God for his unspeakable gift.

II. I have spoken of the meaning and uses of the amen in the Jewish worship; and it now remains for us to consider whether it has any use and obligation in the Christian service.

Of course, as I have said, Christian worship is not enjoined according to rigid and undeviating rules. The law which fixes it is the law of liberty on the one hand, and the law of fitness and highest usefulness on the other. But, as we have already seen, the principles which underlie the Jewish amen are equally vital and fundamental to the Christian worship,—the principles of faith and prayer and self-reproof.

Why, then, should they not find expression in the same way? I sincerely believe they ought. It would put new power and unction and heartiness into our services if it could be so,—aye, more, I am persuaded that the congregational amen is just as greatly needed for
lifting our Lord's-day worship from that dead level of silence into which it has so largely sunk, as the congregational singing is. "Silence is gold, speech is silver," says the proverb. True. And "thy silver and thy gold are mine, saith the Lord." No matter which is best, God made both, and has use for both in his house. The sacraments are silent acts of worship. When they rehearse their sacred mysteries, there is no speech nor language,—their voice is not heard. They speak to the eye and to the touch and to the taste, but not to the ear. After the simple introductory formula has been repeated, they tell their story in silence. They need not to be prompted by the administrator, or to have their utterance garnished with any poor human speech. In holy stillness they carry on their blessed ministry. And there is rest and refreshment in that quiet, sequestered sanctuary of meditation into which they bring us. Speech is intrusive here; talk is irreverent and distracting. They seem to say, by their mute symbology, "Be still, and hear what God will say to you."

But song and prayer are vocal exercises. And total silence here is as unseemly and misplaced as speech was before. It gives the worshippers the semblance of being spectators instead of participants,—Gentiles without the court, instead of members in Christ of the "royal priesthood," whose privilege it is to enter together into the holy place, to make intercession before God. With the immense advantage of unwritten, spontaneous prayer which we enjoy, there need be no corresponding disadvantage of non-participation, if devoutly following the leader of worship with our minds and hearts, we will at the end repeat the one word that
summarizes, shuts and seals and delivers up, the whole prayer to God. The summary is not less than the particulars, because so brief. In one sense it is superior, since it is all in little. Therefore, the Rabbis were wont to say concerning their worship, "Greater is he who saith Amen than he who prays." And the amen is yours, Christian worshippers, believers in Jesus Christ: it is not the minister's. And the usage that has purloined it from you and quietly put it to his exclusive use, is akin to that which in the Romish church has deprived the laity of the cup. I repeat it, it is your property in the service of the Lord's house. You cannot find a single instance in the ancient worship where it was a private and priestly prerogative. It was always a second party or class of persons, and not the principal speaker, who used it. "And David said, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for ever and ever. And all the people said, Amen." — "And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen." Therefore, Christian brethren, worshippers of God and Jesus Christ, unless you are willing to be defrauded, and, perhaps, at the same time, also to defraud Jehovah, take what is yours, and use it henceforth for the glory of God.

But we wish to be scriptural in our conduct, as well as conformable to reason and propriety,—to follow the gospel as well as the law. And what proof is there, it will be asked, that the apostolic church so used this article of worship?

Well, we have at most, only the most casual and fragmentary hints regarding the mode of worship in the early Christian church. But the use of the responsive "Amen" seems to be one of the points about which there can be no question.
Paul, writing to the Corinthians in regard to their prayers in the public assembly, enjoins that they speak in intelligent language, and not in an unknown tongue. “Else,” says he, “when thou bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest?” “He that occupieth the room of the unlearned” is, clearly, the private hearer, in distinction from the one who is addressing the assembly under the direction of the Spirit. It might seem sufficient to have urged that the speaker use an intelligible language, in order that the hearers might understand and be edified. But the apostle carries the obligation still farther, and urges it on the ground that the listener must not be defrauded of his Amen, as though that were an essential element of public worship, and a sacred prerogative of the worshipper. The Romish church, as we know, worships in an unknown tongue. But she has sought to assuage the cruelty of depriving the people of hearing and understanding, by calling them, at the proper moment, by the tinkling of a bell, to respond with the voice to what has been said. But custom, often less kind than superstition, has, in many of our Protestant congregations, practically forbidden the joyful uprising response, after, in our own mother tongue, we have been permitted to hear our sins confessed, and our pardon besought and found. In the light of this text of the apostle, who can doubt that the custom ought to be broken? It is evidently a habit which has been foisted upon us by irreverence and neglect, and not ordained for us by reason and scripture. It bears the stamp of an easy undevoutness, rather than of a hearty and strenuous
religious earnestness. If Paul has not in this scripture distinctly commanded the congregational amen after prayer, he has, as one of our wisest commentators declares, given us "a precedent so clear as to amount almost to an authoritative precept; and one which must raise the question, whether so large a portion of the Christian church has not done wrong in entirely omitting so important a part of public service?"

And this reference, which we have drawn from Paul, concerning the scripturalness of this custom, is emphasized in the strongest possible way, by the fact that we find the usage prevailing in the age directly following the apostolic. Justin Martyr, who could almost touch hands with the immediate disciples of Jesus, declares that, in his day, the Amen of the congregation, at the end of the chief prayer of the worship, was so universal and hearty that it sounded like a peal of thunder. How impressive it must have been! How impressive it would be now, if we could hear it! It would be more than the emphasis of voluminous sound. It would, if sincerely uttered, be a declaration of unity of heart, touching the things desired and the praises offered.

Have you ever been in the Legislature, and heard a petition read from the people, and the signatures thus announced,—"A. B., and one thousand others"? And what weight and impressiveness there has been in that sentence, "and one thousand others,"—the silent, mighty invisible host pressing behind the chief petitioner, and seeming to say, "We must be heard if he is not. If you refuse him and set him aside, each one of us in turn will step into his vacant place to reiterate and prolong the request, till, by our very importunity,
you shall be compelled to grant us our desire." And so I would, that when your minister prays, there might follow his supplication such a peal of accordant amens, that the listeners among the people, as they heard the sound, and the angels in heaven, as they were saluted by the uprising acclamation, might be compelled to exclaim, in very truth, "The minister and one thousand others."

My friends, habit is the worst of tyrants, and tradition the most inexorable of masters. But I am sure we are strong enough to resist them, when they would bind us to what is clearly undesirable. I believe I have shown from scripture that the amen of the whole congregation, at the close of the minister's prayer, is not only proper, but necessary to the true idea of cooperative and congregational worship; and not only necessary, but enjoined, by apostolic example, just as distinctly as the keeping of the Lord's day is. I do not by any means say that it is equally important. There are major requirements, and there are minor requirements; but if they are requirements, their authority is the same. A blade of grass depends for its existence upon the same laws of growth and nutrition as the oak and the cedar. And the least commandment of scripture has the same will of God as its basis as the greatest. Shall we not attend to that which is least, then, as well as to that which is greatest?

I know all that can be said of the danger of formality in our Lord's-day worship. But formality belongs no more to thoughtless utterance than to thoughtless repression; to vain repetitions than to vain silence. Indeed the constant peril of non-participation in religious worship is that decorous inattention — that worst
kind of formalism — may become habitual. By all means let what we do be done with all the heart; and since utterance is confessedly a spur and stimulus to feeling, as well as its vehicle, let us speak more, that we may attend more to what we speak. We shall be on the alert to listen, if we must indorse by our amen. We shall try to believe more intensely with the heart, if we must make confession with the mouth. Oh, that all the people would not only say amen, but say it with such depth of sincerity and earnestness, that it should be the expression of their united faith! — the importunate knocking of scores of souls at the doors of mercy, before which the Lord should answer, “Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation that keepeth the amen may enter in.” How can we be silent before truths that might make the very stones cry out? Nay, let us use our privilege for the glory of God; and when the minister praises God for the blessings which have been purchased for us by the sufferings of Christ, saying, “Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift,” let us, who have been redeemed, say “Amen at his giving of thanks.” And when he repeats to us, that brightest promise of the coming glory, “Surely, I come quickly,” let us joyfully, and with one voice, respond, “Amen! Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”