

The Mentally Handicapped And Worship

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If our preaching does not reach the mentally-handicapped it lacks some element which it ought to possess. They too are little ones of the flock, and even their sounds make us conscious of their presence. They add a certain unexpectedness to the services, some sighs, mutters and amens along with loud and lively discordant singing.

Should some special provision be arranged for them to have other instruction during the hours of worship, e.g. the Lord's Day evenings? The principle argument for that rests upon the view that biblical teaching should be given to the mentally-handicapped in a form most easily understood, and they therefore need a different type of instruction. This cannot be effectively given simultaneously with that given to the rest of the congregation.

A parallel argument is presented for children. If they are to be addressed in the public services of the church, then it must be by a special five-minute address. The assumption in both cases is that simplicity of communication is the primary need in instructing children or the mentally-handicapped, and that any teaching which cannot readily be understood must be avoided.

The arguments brought forward against children's addresses are well known and carry a lot of weight. They surely apply also to special talks to the mentally-handicapped during the worship of the assembled church:

- They segregate children from congregational worship. Adults look on with little interest while the children are being addressed.
- A five-minute talk does not lend itself to teaching.
- A children's address in the morning service is psychologically unsound. Children react adversely to being corrected, admonished and told what to do in the presence of their own parents.
- Children's addresses are a temptation to triviality for preachers.
- To keep the children's attention and be interesting becomes the supreme motive.
- They diminish the importance of the sermon, if not ousting it altogether for some people, just as a strip cartoon turns the attention from the serious news. Adults listen to the simple talk and then sleep through the preaching.

Above all things, the primary need both of children and the mentally-handicapped is not elementary instruction but the removal of that hostility to God which is in their hearts. While the aversion remains there will be darkness of mind and inability to worship God in spirit and truth. Where it is removed by the Holy Spirit's teaching there will be an understanding of the message of the Bible and the proper response of faith and love.

Thus an appreciation of the true needs of the mentally-handicapped will lead us to depend on God and on the means Christ has appointed for the conversion of sinners. That centres upon the church, which is a divine institution ordained by God. In it all believers are united: "There is no such thing in the body of Christ as "Jew" and Greek", "Mentally-handicapped" and "Non-mentally-handicapped", for you are all one person in Christ Jesus". The church exists for God's sake, not for ours, for His honour and our salvation.

What is the purpose of the church service? To praise, worship and adore God, to equip ourselves with His Word so that we may live Christianly in His world as His Body. There are those men to whom God has given a special call and gift authoritatively to proclaim His Word. The Holy Spirit has promised to accompany their words with His light and power. Then it is unthinkable to remove the mentally-handicapped from the congregation because the Spirit of God makes the preaching of the Word a means of dealing with the aversions in the human heart to God. There should be an influence attending the preaching which impresses the mentally-handicapped even though it does not necessarily convert them. To suppose that they may be more profitably occupied during the worship hour by being given another form of instruction is a serious error. It is to take the mentally-handicapped away from the very place where they ought to learn the power of the Word of God and hear the Voice of the Lord in the pulpit. Let neither the value of this instruction nor any serious impressions which are thus gained by the mentally-handicapped prior to conversion be depreciated.

If we isolate the mentally-handicapped we tend to teach them individualism, or reinforce their own feelings of rejection from society. Individualism puts every person on his own. United worship teaches people by first-hand experience that their teachers and helpers sit on exactly the same level of privilege and access to God as they do, if they are real Christians. Let us stop dividing the church into all kinds of groups, the old, students, the young, singles, marrieds, men, etc. The worship service is for all the people; the church is not just a particular age group. Dr Lloyd-Jones wrote, "There is no greater fallacy than to think that you need a gospel for special types of people. It is entirely contrary to plain biblical teaching... The whole idea... is utterly ridiculous because on that argument and supposition one could never preach to a mixed general congregation. You would have to have one service for non-intellectuals... another for intellectuals.... Then you might have services for the different ages... The results would be that you would be dividing up and atomizing your congregation: you would never have a common public act of worship... In any case, it would be entirely destructive of this great fundamental principle of the New Testament, that we are all one... We are all one in sin, one in failure, one in

hopelessness, one in need of the Lord Jesus Christ and His great salvation" [Preaching and Preachers p. 130-133].

Children, scientists, mentally-handicapped and professors all must worship God, and are commanded to worship God in the assembly of all believers. "Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear Jehovah your God" [Deut 31:12]. "I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the Lord's house" [Ps 116:18]. "And all Judah stood before Jehovah with their little ones, their wives and their children" [2 Chron 20:13].

Let us not cripple the spiritual development of the mentally-handicapped by excluding them from those places and occasions of formal worship. They belong there. It is their church. I think God looks for them every Sunday. He wants to talk to them as well as to everyone else.

We need humble child-like faith to worship. The mentally-handicapped must know God, but they must also worship Him. To think that they can learn more by a sperate meeting is to ignore the fact that a Christian home for the mentally-handicapped is a place for teaching Christian truth while the church service is for worshipping.

Some may say that we tend to ignore the handicapped in our worship services. I hope this is not the case. In every service there will be some hymns they should know, and the more they attend the more they will gain in familiarity. Sometimes they have chosen some of the hymns which we have sung. I am always impressed with how much they pick up from sermons. Some of them are quick to tease me when I make mistakes in my preaching or in the announcements! With a few questions and comments from the staff of the Christian home they learn to listen and apply the sermons themselves. They notice how seriously the staff and young people around them treat what they are hearing. To encourage them to sing, to bow their heads, to put money into the offering boxes as their gift, and to explain to them what the service means, increases their sense of belonging and participation. I believe firmly that the handicapped are included in the giving of the greeting and the call to worship at the beginning of the service and also in the final blessing as in all other aspects of any service, even though at times our services may seem a little too "high" or too "deep" for them.

Our own simple New Testament mode of worship is ideal for the mentally-handicapped and saves them from much perilous confusion. Its familiar structure prepares them for each new aspect of our approach to God or His response to us. The absence of hand-clapping, arm-raising, drama, bands, dance and rhythmic repetitive choruses, etc. teaches them that the essence of worship is an inward attitude of heart and an inward melody of praise to God. The absence of vestments, altars, and kneeling at the rail to receive the sacrament teaches them evangelical truth that we may through Jesus come to God just where we are and as we are.

It is by these means that ministers in the past have effectively helped the mentally-handicapped. Take Dr Alexander Stewart of Scotland, the brilliant theologian and creative dogmatician, chose by Chalmers to be his successor in St John's, Glasgow, and the man chosen as Candlish's successor at Free St George's, Edinburgh, although he died before the induction could take place. Dr Stewart began his ministry in Cromarty in 1824. Amongst his congregation there sat two young men of widely different intellectual abilities. Hector Munro was then 20 years of age and a mentally-handicapped weaver. Hugh Miller was 22, and through a combination of diligence and genius became a highly competent geologist and master of a brilliant English style. In 1840 he was appointed editor of *The Witness*, and in 1876 a 14-volume set of his collected writings was published. Both these men were converted under Alexander Stewart and both were fed by him weekly, as he "poured forth viva voce his full-volumed and ever-sparkling tide of eloquent ideas, as freely and richly as the nightingale, unconscious of a listener, pours forth her melody in the shade". In 1837 the mentally-handicapped Hector Munro died, and the next year when a friend was visiting Dr Stewart he took him to visit the grave, telling him that he often came to this spot. He turned to his friend and said of Munro, "I have been edified by his words, yes, and have been on occasions instructed by them, and I have often been comforted by them".

The gravestone contains these words: Reader

In this grave repose the mortal remains of

HECTOR MUNRO

A man of humble birth, poor circumstances, and even defective intellect; but on that account a more remarkable illustration of the glorious grace of God, for he was manifestly taught by the Divine Spirit, and eminently holy.

He earned an honourable livelihood by his trustworthiness, and this stone, placed here by voluntary contribution, testifies the general respect for his memory.

He died the 27th September 1837, aged 33 years.

"In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father, for so it seemed good in

Thy sight" [Luke 10:21]

His companion and later biographer, reading those words and hearing Dr Stewart's solemn tribute to this man, later recorded the following, "How wonderful! a man of loftiest intellect, like Hugh Miller, and a man of the very least intellect consistent with sanity, like Hector Munro, by the same preaching, from the same lips, are brought to Jesus â€” brought to His cross and to participation of the eternal life which He is and which is in Him! Salvation truly is of God! The Gospel is the instrument of His Spirit equally with all. Grace, therefore, and grace only, has the glory" (Stewart's *The Tree Of Promise*, p xxxix). It was that gospel preached by a man called of God to that vocation and coming with power and the Holy Ghost and with much assurance that brought both the genius and the mentally-handicapped to love God.

I do not hold the view that restless, noisy, mentally-handicapped people should be encouraged to remain in church notwithstanding the disturbance which they cause. Instruction and discipline are conjoined in Scripture and are not to be separated in spiritual worship. The Christian staff who are daily examples to the mentally-handicapped also train them, amongst many things, for their conduct on Sundays and their need to mortify selfishness and have respect for others.

If ministers prepare sermons without any consideration for the fact that the little ones are in the congregation, then those little ones will all too quickly conclude that what is said is never intended for their ears. At times one speaks so simply that the youngest children prick up their ears and listen. Occasionally an entire sermon can be preached to the children, just as one may be preached to singles or to parents or to deacons. However there is a delicacy and respect involved in speaking publicly and specifically and at length to the mentally-handicapped. I cannot envisage a situation when I ever shall preach to them alone, for the gospel is offered and applied simply to them all. Much of the Christian instruction of so wide a range of mental handicap must be individual and personal. There are daily prayers and bible reading, Bible memorization and private counselling. Enormous benefit comes from this, and just as our young people gain much from going to the Banner week-end conference and to camps where often they see the faith as they have not seen it in their own places of worship, so too small groups of handicapped can derive spiritual benefit from special camps and holidays that are arranged for them.

Worship services are unique. They are ordained of God for all His people to magnify together the divine Almighty Lord, to hear the Word of God, to know the presence of the Holy Spirit and to bow down before the Lord of lords and King of kings.

Rev. Geoffrey Thomas

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www.banneroftruth.org Rev. Thomas regularly has in his congregation 15 mentally handicapped people. They live in Plas Llest, a home of Christian Concern for the Mentally Handicapped, which was established through the support of his church 10 years ago.