

"Opening our doors to God" is the text of an address given by Rev. Dr. B. R. White at the Mainstream Conference held at The Hayes, Swanwick in January 1980.

It is now offered by MAINSTREAM as a contribution to the Denomination's thought at the time of our call to Commitment.

I begin with the letter of the risen Christ to the Church at Laodicea, Revelation 3, 14-22 and, especially, verse 20 - "Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to eat with him, and he with me." The Church at Laodicea, as you know, was doing very well, a report that year to the Association could reflect her self-satisfaction: "I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing." Evidently at Laodicea the normal lacks lamented by so many of the churches were non-existent. There was no lack of money - acute money worries in a local church are often an evidence of spiritual malaise, (but then abundant finances are not necessarily a proof of spiritual health!) There was no hint, however, at Laodicea of doctrinal irregularity, the teaching given was apparently sound, biblical and scholarly. Neither was there any sign of lack of leadership. Even, it would appear, the various qualifications for church growth (whether they were 7 or 77) were, as far as the church at Laodicea could judge, all present and correct. So she could report, "I am rich, I have prospered, I lack nothing". Yet her spiritual life was like many a Mainstream congregation today, flat, tepid, flavourless. She had money, she had doctrinal orthodoxy, she had leadership, her situation was set fair for church growth, she had crowded congregations, what did she, what could she lack? She lacked the One without whom all else she possessed was doomed to die. She lacked the crucified and risen Lord and, what was worse, she did not recognise her lack, she did not hunger for her Lord. "I am rich, I have prospered, I have need of nothing" - and Jesus stands outside the door. Only Christ did she lack and he was left to knock for entry.

These words, "Behold I stand at the door and knock", have been so often used at evangelical occasions to challenge people to first time commitment that it requires a considerable wrench in our thinking to hear them as they were first intended, as a chall-

enge to the committed, a challenge to the Church. Yet here in Swanwick for this first Mainstream Conference we, of all people, ought to hear these words aright for we come as those committed and concerned for the churches of the Baptist denomination in this land against the background of the wider Christian fellowship of churches and denominations in this country. Of course, as we bear in mind the church setting of this verse, we must not forget that it is to the individual member, to the individual believer, in that church setting that the challenge is addressed. Christ's way into the life of the congregation is through the heart of its members: that is made very clear and that is why none of us should lose hope of our local church because the Lord's way into the heart of our church is through our hearts. None of us should lose hope, even if some of us have reason enough! Often Christ's way into the hearts of the members, however, is through the life of the church. The life of the congregation and the life of the believer react one upon another in a multitude of subtle inter-relationships. So a healthy church makes for healthy believers as much as a healthy believer can help to make a healthy church. Spiritual health for the believer, for the church, for the denomination, is dependent upon our having more Christ and not being satisfied with that which so far we have of him. Laodicea did not hunger for Christ, she hardly noticed his absence. The question which presses in upon us today, I believe, is, do we hunger for him? To hunger for Christ is to hear his knocking and open our heart's door to him. Listen to this prayer attributed to St. Colomba -

"Almighty Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
Eternal, ever Blessed Gracious God,
to me the least of Saints, to me allow
that I may keep a door in Paradise;
that I may keep even the smallest door,
the furthest door, the darkest, coldest,
door, the door that is least used, the
stiffest door, if so it be but in thine
house O God, if so it be that I can see

thy glory, even afar, and hear thy voice,
O God, and know that I am with thee, thee,
O God."

That is the prayer of the man who hungers for God, at any cost, a man who hungers as I do not and as perhaps you do not. The first beginning of renewed spiritual growth is to pray for that hunger. The Lord Jesus promises, "I am the Bread of Life, whoever comes to me shall never be hungry, and he who believes in me shall never be thirsty and the man who comes to me I will never turn away".

If you do not possess A.R. Tozer's book, The Pursuit of God (1948) let me urge you to obtain it. There is treasure on every page. I remember that he writes of evangelicals generally, that "we have been snared in the coils of a spurious logic which insists that if we have found him we need no more seek him. Thus the whole testament of the worshipping, seeking, singing Church across the ages is crisply set on one side." We need to be seeking our God and Saviour continually. I say this to my own condemnation, do not misunderstand me, but it is because we do not that we are like so many spiritual Peter Pans, believers who have never grown up, ministers and people alike. Let us pray for a hunger for the triune God and let us prepare to seek after him even though we know that in one sense he has already found us and we are already found in him. It will be costly in terms of study, decision, self-discipline but in our heart of hearts we know that if we fear the price, the reward will be beyond our measure or our imagining. We have so often sung:

"We taste thee, O thou living Bread,
And long to feast upon thee still,
We drink of thee the fountain head
And thirst our souls from thee to fill."

Do you lean into those words as you sing them? We ought to be leaning into those words and taking them seriously. We know them too well. But let us return to Revelation 3 v 20 - "Behold I stand at the

door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him and he with me."

This address is concerned with the means by which, given a growing hunger for God among us and our brothers and sisters in the Churches, the doors can be opened to Christ. In saying what I am going to say I believe I am pointing to a programme which we in Mainstream must become committed to as part of our witness in the denomination. I do not pretend to cover any of the ground about fellowship, about social witness, about evangelism, I just want to talk to you this morning about opening our doors and opening them again and again to the living Lord Jesus Christ.

First in private prayer. Now we know, some who are ministers know far better than anyone else, how hard that can be. But in private prayers we open our doors to Christ's presence and blessing. What is it to grow spiritually? It is to grow up into the likeness of Christ, to become more fully human, open, unselfish, unfearful, compassionate, obedient to God, dependent upon God and, possibly, crucified. To become what Adam was intended to be and what the second Adam truly was. To be truly human. We need him, we need to pray for a hunger for him, we need to open our hearts doors continually to him. We do not want to be like that one who once had a great experience of God and when someone came years afterwards to talk to him he said "Yes, I once had an experience of God". He went upstairs to get the paper on which he had written it down but his experience had been eaten by mice. John Owen, who was a fairly stern and forthright Puritan, wrote On the grace and duty of being spiritually minded, "Sometimes indeed the soul is surprised into acts of gracious communion with Christ." But that is not to be expected unless "we abide in those ways and means which prepare and make ourselves meet for the reception and entertainment of him." If we are setting ourselves to prayer we will be walking the ways

where God will meet us and catch up our hearts into his heart. God will sometimes cause our hearts to flame out with love towards him but not if we seldom and all too briefly think of him and spend no time with him. It is the temptation of ministers and church members to believe that because we are about the Lord's work we are open to the Lord, but it is very easy to be about the Lord's work and not to be seeking after him.

We need discipline not just internally but externally and this is something which I believe we have not practised as we might. The Puritans also had something to say about the help others can give and of which we nowadays take too little advantage. Richard Sibbes said, "It is a course that will have a blessing attending it for friends to join in league one to watch over another and observe each other's ways. There is no living member of Christ but has spiritual love infused into him and some ability to comfort others." I believe that is true; there is no living member of Christ but has spiritual love infused into him and some ability to comfort others!

What I want to say to you is that sometimes ministers complain of the local fraternal; sometimes, as church members, we complain of the coldness of the local church; sometimes we complain, but not to others, I hope, about our nearest and dearest. But does this not open up some possibility that we as serious Christians should take into our minds and practice? Ought we not to be having, as it were, a league between husband and wife to hold each other up? Ought we not to be covenanting with friends in our church fellowship quite specifically to pray for the Lord to come more and more continually into our lives as well as our churches' life? Ought we not in the local fraternal to be seeking a covenant with our brothers and sisters there for this? Ought we not to be looking into such means of fellowship as specific covenants together, a rule of life, if you like? Though perhaps that goes further than many of us would find it easy to go at once.

But we must have times of withdrawal or private prayer, even from our nearest and dearest. Some of you will remember that old book of Alexander White's Teach us to pray and one verse he quotes, which has stayed in my mind since the first time I read it:

"Down to gehenna and up to the throne,
He travels fastest who travels alone."

This is not only a warning for motor-ways! We need some time when we are quietly opening our doors to the Lord, for thinking magnificently of the Saviour. We need also, or at least you do if you are like me, a scrutinised life. You really do need to look at yourself rather hard, you need to have some moments before the Lord sometimes when you are alone, to look at what you are doing and why you have been doing it and what you said and why you have been saying it - and seek forgiveness. We need the moments of silence, we are too anxious in the face of silence. But ought we not to have silence in our own prayers and in our public worship in a way we do not? And ought we not to have that old-fashioned prayer list? And ought we not to look at our daily diary quietly before we go into it? And ought we not to be soaking the scripture into our own souls? These are the grand means of opening the doors of our personal life to Christ and it is very easy to omit them. At least I find it very easy.

But I want to speak also of the second way of opening the doors to the living Lord which we are all concerned about as worshippers. In corporate worship the congregation opens their door to Christ together. Christian worship, is not a ministerial solo, Christian worship is not a concert by the choir, and Christian worship is not a music hall programme in which various believers do their unprepared, unrehearsed turns. A story is told of an American visitor by John Gunstone's, A people for his praise. The story is of an American visitor who was taken to a service in the ornate chapel of the Royal Holloway College by the Principal. When the choir began to sing an anthem the American began to join in only to be hushed by hi

host. "May I not offer my praises in the house of God?" protested the visitor. "This is not the house of God," replied the Principal, "this is the Royal Holloway College." But I think that is the least of our weaknesses, our trouble is, I think, the music hall rather than the concert hall.

The problem of worship for us is highlighted by two movements of the Holy Spirit. First, there is the movement which was almost alone in the Church before the 1960's! the Holy Spirit and the liturgical movement which quickened many Christians in many denominations, in their concern for right worship. Then there came in the '60s the second movement of the Holy Spirit. This was the charismatic movement. To some extent in some denominations the two are still interlaced. For example, the liturgically structured worship of our brethren in the Church of England has benefited enormously from both movements, they have moved on from "1662 and all that". We do ourselves a great disservice by not recognising that our problem is very different. Our churches were hardly touched by the liturgical movement. Payne and Winward notwithstanding, so what happened was that the charismatic movement did not come to a structured worship, it came to an untheological crumble sandwich; is it surprising that all you have now is untheological crumbs? Hence we have therefore got to think very hard about the structures of the worship of the people of God. We have not yet taken sufficient account of something else also; that we face an untaught, unaware, untraditional generation of worshippers, many of whom have no background in the churches. Many of those who are converted and come into our churches, the more effective we are in our outreach, will have no background at all. You can assume nothing. The Anglicans, in their Series 3 preface to worship at morning and evening prayer, say this:

"We have come together as a family of God
in our Father's presence
To offer him praise and thanksgiving,
To hear and receive His Holy word,
To bring before him the needs of the world,

To seek his forgiveness of our sins,
To seek his grace that through His son
Jesus Christ

We may give ourselves to his service."

Now, if the Anglicans feel that they need to explain what they are doing, do we not? I know some of you say 'Good Morning' or 'Good Evening' to the people but I do not think that is quite adequate as a preface to worship. We come to offer him praise and thanksgiving, to hear and receive his holy word, (that's why a pause could usefully come after the reading of the Word and not only after the preaching of it!); "To bring before him the needs of the world" - yet, with many of our churches, to hear the intercessory prayer you would not think the world existed; "To ask his forgiveness of our sins and to seek his grace that we may give ourselves to his service." Are these not the elements which, not in a perfunctory way, but in a planned, ordered, refreshing, lively and varied way should be included in all our Sunday worship services?

My brothers and sisters, remember that most people only come to one service and even those who come to two services ought to have one service in which their soul is satisfied by the comprehensive diet of all the elements in worship about which I have just spoken to you. Yet, in some of our churches the Word, if it is read, is so badly read that it would not matter if it were a shopping list even by people who hold a high doctrine of the authority of the word! The thanksgiving is just one more set of turgid phrases with no thought, no preparation, no concern. Confession of our sins we might include or we might not, but a scriptural assurance of forgiveness is hardly included at all.

How is our worship to be refreshed? I wonder if you have looked again in recent years as I have in the last few weeks at Stephen Winward's The reformation of our Worship. It is still an important book if we are to make sure that our worship is an opening of doors to the Lord. There are five themes

that he thought were enormously important, and, I think, have not changed since he published it in 1964 before anybody had seriously heard of the charismatic movement.

First, corporate worship must be structured as dialogue, God's word and congregational response.

Secondly, he said, corporate worship involves giving as well as receiving. Too many people go to get a blessing but they do not go to yield themselves in sacrifice. We need to recover, says Stephen Winward, the Biblical conviction that service is offering that worship is sacrifice.

Thirdly, corporate worship involves the whole personality, body and senses, movement and action as well as thoughts and words.

Fourthly, corporate worship involves a structure which is both, and he used the phrase in 1964, ordered and charismatic. Some of us need to hear one word and some the other. All of us need to hear both.

Fifthly, corporate worship involves extensive congregational participation and not, what may be called, the priesthood of one believer.

Congregational participation! Work at that, my brothers and sisters, work at that: for worship that is soul-satisfying, that we are not ashamed of before the high and holy God who has given the Lord Jesus Christ to be our Saviour. The high and holy One is not always easily recognised in our services. Nor that those leading the service have ever been in his presence! Just as true worship is an evangelistic instrument in itself, so unworthy worship can turn people away. And while you are having your chummy reunion with the Lord, remember there are some people who are not being helped at all, remember to count the steps which turn into and out of your church! Remember the offence of the gospeller is not always the offence of the gospel and the offence which our worship gives is not necessarily the offence of the

gospel: it may be ours.

There are source materials which we should be using including a new book from Baptist Church House called Praise God. I suppose a perfect worship book is not likely to come in our generation or perhaps in any other, but this has much material to help us on, to help us think together. We must seize hold of all helps for enriching and deepening worship. We have a duty to each other and to the Lord to take this seriously. A study group which reads and argues and prays about worship could be important in your church, could you have one? A study weekend when you start from what makes a favourite hymn and move to the glorifying of God at his table, could be valuable. It can be done. Is it not time we gave attention to the thing that we share with our brothers and sisters in Christ most fully, most often? Experiments, not too many, not too often, there ought to be. Our ministers must lead here e.g. in the use of silence or in the peace. But the peace ought to be used more variedly. Is it enough to have a chat with one or two people and then say "the peace of the Lord be with you" and for him or her to respond, "and also with you"? Might we not one evening turn to our immediate neighbour and say, "there is one thing that has been very much on my mind for this whole week, I would ask you, just for a moment, to bear this concern up before the Lord in your prayer." Then we could have a pause across the whole congregation and afterwards each turn to that person beside us and then say "the peace of the Lord be with you" and have them respond, "and also with you". But let us be varied, but let us be thinking and let us have as much of the life of the Spirit as we can.

Have you ever thought of how we should use the Lord's Prayer? We talk about it as "the Family Prayer" so often, but I want to say to you very firmly, remember, that it is the prayer of the whole family of God from the first day of Pentecost until now; it links us with the universal Church and the Communion of Saints and the final triumph of the Saviour. How can

we use it, explain it, divide it and grow into the meaning of it? Some of you will have a little book by Evelyn Underhill called Abba and know what she says there about the Lord's Prayer. She says those who use this prayer must pray it from the Cross as Jesus could when he said 'Our Father'. You and I are a long way from being able to do that but we should be moving into the Lord's Prayer, moving into the depths and riches of the centuries, belonging to saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs and all those who cry 'Amen' to God. This is not just a prayer everybody can use because everybody knows it; this prayer is the battle cry of the Kingdom and the people of God.

And now, lastly, the third way of opening doors to the living God, is the Lord's Supper. There we open the door to the crucified, risen and triumphant Lord. I am more and more convinced, not only on historical grounds and Biblical grounds, but in my own experience, that we must set this service at the very heart of our worship. By the way we observe the Supper we can slam and bolt and bar the doors against Christ. Yet he knocks that he may sup with us as host and feast. From the earliest days the Supper was at the heart of Christian worship. At the heart of the week was the Lord's Day: at the heart of the Lord's Day was the Lord's Supper and at the heart of the Lord's Supper was and is the Lord's presence! How does our practice slam the door on him?

(1) By thrusting the Supper from the centre to the edge of our worship. Is that not what so many of our churches do?

(2) By confusing the Lord's Supper with the Last Supper; the two are not the same. There is the Resurrection in between. I have heard a minister have us sing 'Oh come and mourn with me awhile' at the Table of the Lord! My brethren, that is tragic, especially when we have in our present hymn book a very strong section for the Lord's Supper. And the resurrection hymns we need not leave for Easter Day only. One should not be afraid to sing 'Thine be the Glory' just because it was written by a Regent's man!

(3) We slam the doors on the Lord by the rigidity of our practice, there is no warmth, relaxation, experiment. We have not got to keep to a very special form at the Lord's Table.

(4) By these individual little cubes and individual glasses we deny the fellowship of the body. I know our doctors will say how dangerous it is for us to drink unfermented wine together. Well, eat some unfermented bread together, if you cannot get round to the wine. At least that would be a start!

(5) By our emphasis on remembering rather than upon feasting we forget the presence of the Lord amongst his own gathered in his name.

(6) By stressing our act of remembrance rather than God's deed we become unexpectant that he will set the place alive by His presence, at His Table, among His own. We do not have that expectancy, "you do not receive because you do not ask" says the Lord. You do not ask because you do not expect.

(7) By emphasising the past and a little of the present we fail to look forward to the glory of the marriage supper of the Lamb and the triumph of our God in Christ. This should be a festival, this should be a celebration! It should not be a grisly after-the-funeral-meal with the mourning family, lamenting an absence.

The Lord's Supper proclaims the fullness of the gospel in its three dimensions and I think one of the reasons why our worship is as it is, our churches are as they are, our experience is as it is, is because we do not set the Supper at the heart of our worship, with its three dimensions, the past of the Crucified Lord, the presence of the Living Lord and the future of the Triumphant Lord. All three dimensions belong to our experience of the Lord Jesus Christ and ought to be in our worship. They belong to worship at the Table of the Lord. You see, we fasten on one half of the words of institution, on "This do", "This do in remembrance of me", we even have it engraved in wood on some of our communion

tables. But what about the other half 'This is my body', 'This is my blood': is this not a participation in the body and blood of the Lord? I am no cryptopapist! I am talking about what scripture says. Scripture does not say it in the way the Roman Church has thought but it does stress the Presence. Read the great Christian writers, including John Calvin; read our own greatest confession, a Baptist edition of the Congregational edition of the Westminster Confession. (Nobody can say we are not ecumenical, we can take over anybody's thoughts!) Listen,

"the Supper of the Lord Jesus was instituted by him to be observed in his churches until the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance and showing forth the sacrifice of his death, confirmation or believers in all the benefits thereof, their spiritual nourishment and growth in him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe to him and to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him and with each other".

Are you saying that at the Table of the Lord? And then it goes on:-

"Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this ordinance, do then inwardly by faith really and indeed yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death.....The body and blood of Christ being not corporally or carnally but spiritually present to the faith of believers in that ordinance as the elements are to their outward senses".

Now, that is what the greatest of the Calvinistic confessions of faith amongst the Baptists said and taught. It was the standard confession right into the 19th century in England and America. And we have forgotten.

(3) We also open the doors to the Lord by the rigidity of
If the Supper really is, as we with all the re-
formed tradition of Christ's church have always be-
lieved, for our spiritual nourishment and growth in
him, since we inwardly, by faith, really and indeed,
spiritually receive and feed upon Christ crucified
and all the benefits of His death, is it not time the
Supper took the centre of our worship? Perhaps it is
because we have not given sufficient and right atten-
tion to this that the gospel has not been given its
proper three dimensional and balanced proclamation.
The one perfect and sufficient sacrifice in the past,
the participation in the ongoing life of the Risen
Lord and the expectation of the final triumph over us,
his Church and over space and time and tragedy by him.
We lament and often we pray as if the world, the
whole wide world, were not in his hands but the Supper
of the Lord proclaims that one day we shall see and
every eye with us, that he is Lord, King of Kings and
Lord of Lords.

Can you not hear him knocking at our doors, over
our prayers, our private prayers, our covenanting to-
gether to hold each other up to pray? Can you not
hear him summoning us to give ourselves to that wor-
ship which feeds the hunger of God's people for him,
not a hunger for programmes, not a hunger for theo-
logy only (though I believe theology is vitally im-
portant) not a hunger for numbers, not a hunger for
new church buildings but a hunger for him. Ought we
not expect him to satisfy our hunger at his table
where we come at his invitation for his hour. Do you
not hear the Lord Jesus knocking at our doors?