

## Preface

This syllabus is the fruit of an interim course which I taught in January of 1992. It was suggested to me that what had originally been prepared in the form of lecture outlines be put into a form for wider use.

The interim course was an interesting one, also from the viewpoint of the discussion among the students, generated in class by various aspects of the subject of public prayers. I am indebted to some ideas discussed in class for some of the material in this syllabus.

As will become obvious, however, I am chiefly indebted to the fine book by Samuel Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer*. Even for those who read this syllabus that book needs to be read widely, especially by pastors who are called to engage in the high calling of leading their congregations in this most solemn of activities.

It is our prayer that the material in this syllabus will help others in the most difficult calling of bringing the congregation to God's throne of grace through public prayers.

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## **Introduction**

The minister's work in the congregation is extensive and varied; many responsibilities fall upon him. He is called to be preacher of the everlasting gospel, pastor to the sheep, teacher of the children of God's covenant, theologian, and writer. He very likely will be required to serve on various committees in his own congregation as well as in his denomination. He must be husband and father in his home and provide for the spiritual needs of his family.

The central calling of the minister is, however, to lead the congregation over which the Lord has placed him in public worship on the Lord's Day. In this calling he must not only bring the Word of God to the sheep, but he must also be a liturgist who, in an appropriate manner, guides God's people through the liturgy of worship.

It is to but one aspect of these latter responsibilities that we direct attention. Among his responsibilities to lead the congregation in worship is his calling to lead God's people in public prayer.

Many times and under many different circumstances the minister is called to lead others in prayer. He does this as prophet in his own home as his wife and children gather for family worship. He leads in prayer in the catechism classes, in the societies which he leads, in various programs given in the church, in pastoral work where he prays with and in the name of the suffering, the dying, the erring, and the troubled in heart and mind. Repeatedly (and perhaps too often) others look to the minister to lead in prayer.

While in the course of this discussion, opportunities will arise to discuss some of these latter responsibilities in a minister's life, our chief concern is the minister's calling to lead the congregation in prayer in the worship service. And on this matter we will concentrate our attention.

It is possible that a minister might consider the matter of public prayer in the worship service to be of little importance. That it is indeed so considered by many ministers is evident from the fact that many give no thought to this aspect of their calling and simply pray in the congregation as thoughts come into their heads on the pulpit.

Yet many worship services have been spoiled almost before they begin by poor congregational prayers; and, on the contrary, many worship services have been richly blessed, in large measure by the spiritual atmosphere created in the public prayers of the minister. A minister who is not able to lead in public prayer ought not to be on the pulpit at all, for one of his qualifications for this high office is ability to lead the congregation in this part of its worship.

The minister who takes this task lightly and thoughtlessly is remiss in his duties and derelict in his responsibilities towards the people of God.

Samuel Miller, the gifted Presbyterian preacher and theologian of the last century, underscored the importance of this subject by devoting an entire book to it.<sup>1</sup> Concerning the exalted character of this task he writes:

This prayer is, of course, to be considered as the united act of him who leads, and of all who join him in the exercise. Were it to be regarded as merely the vocal utterance of the wants and desires of the individual who presides and leads, it would be by no means invested with the responsible and touching character which really belongs to it. But when regarded as the joint and humble supplication of hundreds of penitent and believing souls, all engaged in pouring out their hearts to the God of salvation, it assumes an aspect, not only deeply interesting, but eminently adapted to enlist and elevate all the most devout feelings of the worshippers. What an important office does he occupy, who undertakes to be the leader in such an exercise! How full, at once, of what enlightened and ardent piety, what judgment, what taste, what a delicate perception of the wants and the privileges of the people of God, and what power to express them aright, are indispensable to the appropriate and suitable discharge of this high duty!<sup>2</sup>

J. J. Van Oosterzee, a Dutch theologian, writes on the same subject.

So to pray and give thanks, that it shall truly deserve this name; to do that in the name and really in accordance with the need of so great and diverse a multitude; ever afresh, and in such wise that the congregation may reckon with confidence upon receiving an answer—who that reflects on all this, but feels that prayer is to be regarded as a *main* constituent of public worship, and the doctrine of prayer as a matter of the most serious import? Liturgics is not in a position to teach one single leader in reality to pray; it must leave this to a Higher One. But it can certainly give hints and precepts, which—where only the right tone of spirit is present—promote its becoming expression, and thereby augment the impressiveness and the fruitfulness of the common worship of God.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Dabney makes much the same point.

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1849).

<sup>2</sup>Miller, pp. 28, 29.

<sup>3</sup>J. J. Van Oosterzee, *Practical Theology* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1889) p. 404.

Many ignorant Protestants depreciate the devotional acts of the sanctuary too much. I would protest against this unseemly and mischievous extreme. It is for this reason, in part, that I would give great emphasis to the minister's duty of preparing himself thoroughly for public prayer, and performing his part with propriety.<sup>4</sup>

Dabney then goes on to say that much of what he has said in connection with preaching in this book applies equally well to public prayer.

It would be my guess that as Seminary students ponder the time when they as students will be licensed to bring a Word of edification in the churches, and when they ponder their calling in the future when God gives them a congregation in which to serve, this responsibility to lead in public prayer presents in their minds a formidable obstacle to the successful carrying out of their task.

This difficulty of leading in public prayer continues to be such for some years in the ministry, especially as the minister is called to engage in public prayers twice on the Lord's Day. He cannot but wonder whether he is not becoming so jaded in his prayers that he falls into patterns of thoughts and expression which are old and tattered and which, by their mechanical nature, detract from the fervency of prayer.

It is out of concern for the minister who takes this part of his calling seriously and out of concern for the church of Christ in her worship of the living God that we offer these pages to the public.

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<sup>4</sup>Robert L. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979) p. 345.

## Chapter 1

# The Idea of Worship

Before we address the subject of public prayer itself, it is important to consider, be it but briefly, the idea of worship within the context of which public prayer takes place.

In searching about for a definition of worship, we can do no better than begin with the definition offered by Rev. Herman Hoeksema:

Worship is that service of God which takes place wherever God meets with His people as the instituted church on earth, and that too, through the medium of the office.<sup>5</sup>

There are several words which are used for worship in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, while *'ahad*, with its basic meaning, "to serve," is sometimes used in the sense of "service" and even "adoration," the more common word comes from the verb *shacha*. The word, the most common in the Old Testament, means to prostrate one's self and is almost always translated in the LXX by the Greek word, *proskuneoo*.

In the Greek New Testament especially three words are used to refer to worship: 1) *proskuneoo*, which depicts the posture of kissing the ground as an act of reverence and obeisance; 2) *gonupeteoo*, which means literally, "to bend the knee," and is used to emphasize the inner attitude of humility and self-abasement; 3) *latreuoo*, which refers to the offering of sacrifice or service and has the broad meaning of service of God, but includes such liturgical acts as prayer, fasting, etc.

While the New Testament Scriptures do not often speak explicitly of the corporate worship of the church of Christ, the Old Testament Scriptures refer to such corporate worship very often. This common reference to corporate worship is due to the fact that the worship of God in the dispensation of types and shadows was inextricably woven into the fabric of Israel's service in the tabernacle and temple.

References to corporate worship, however, are found even earlier. In Genesis 4:26b reference is made to what is most likely the beginning of corporate worship on the part of the people of God: "Then began men to call upon the name of the Lord."

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<sup>5</sup>Herman Hoeksema, *Liturgics* (Unpublished syllabus) p. 1. Another interesting definition of worship appears in a book by Ralph P. Martin: "Worship is the dramatic celebration of God in his supreme worth in such a manner that his 'worthiness' becomes the norm and inspiration of human living." Ralph P. Martin, *The Worship of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982) p. 4.

Scripture contains many references to the sacrifices of Abel, Noah, and the patriarchs; and, with reference to the latter, the patriarchs are said to have sacrificed as a part of the worship of the family or entire clan over which they ruled.<sup>6</sup>

In the nation of Israel, the corporate worship of God was confined to the tabernacle and temple, the center of Israel's ecclesiastical life. This worship formed, though in a typical way, the basic pattern and structure of all the worship of God.

At the very center of the worship of God in the temple was the idea of covenant fellowship with God. The temple was a symbol and type of God's covenant fellowship with His people. God and His people dwelt together under the one roof of the temple; in this way God was the God of Israel, and the Israelites were His people.

In the Old Testament, however, such fellowship was possible only on a low level. God dwelt behind the veil, between the wings of the cherubim on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. Israel was limited to the outer court of the temple. Between God and His people were the veil, the Holy Place, the Aaronitic priesthood, and the altar of burnt offering. Thus, though they dwelt *with* God, the people might not come *close to* God. And this was because the blood of atonement was not yet shed, for the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin.

The fulfillment of the temple lies in the work of Jesus Christ. According to John 2:18-22, Jesus' own body is the fulfillment of the temple, for "in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9), and the church is the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:27). God dwells in covenant fellowship with His people in Christ.

As I mentioned earlier, little is directly said in the New Testament concerning the corporate worship of the church. It is presupposed in many places: in passages which describe the coming together of the saints (Heb. 10:25); in passages which deal with the special offices in the church; in passages which deal with various functions of the church, such as the taking of collections (I Cor. 16:1, 2) and the exercise of Christian discipline (I Cor. 5:4, 5); and in letters written to established and organized churches which met for worship. This latter includes the letters written by John to the seven churches in Asia Minor, recorded in Revelation 2 and 3.

The key passage with respect to worship is found in John 4:24: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

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<sup>6</sup>See Genesis 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 22:13; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1-7. There is an interesting passage in Job 1:5 where Job, a contemporary of Abraham, is said to have offered sacrifices every day for the sins of his children, a covenant responsibility of a father and patriarch.

From all these references we may glean a few ideas which describe the central and important characteristics of worship.

Usually various distinctions are made as worship is applied to the lives of the people of God. It is surely true that, in the broadest sense of the word, all the life of a child of God ought to be an act of worship, for all his life ought to be *coram deo* (before the face of God); all his life ought to be a life of service; all his life ought to be lived in such a way that it is to God's glory, giving adoration to Him who alone is worthy of praise and glory forever.

In a narrower sense of the word, the personal and private devotions, of which Jesus speaks in Matthew 6:5-8, are worship, for in the closet of our prayers we bow in the presence of our God in thanksgiving and adoration and bring before the throne of His grace all our needs. In the same sense of the word, mention is often made of family worship. An integral part of family life is the devotions in which a family joins and by means of which the family together is instructed in the Word of God, comes together before God in prayer, and lives together in the consciousness that God is the covenant God and Father of His people for Christ's sake.

In our discussion, we are speaking of the corporate worship of the church of Jesus Christ. The church of Christ is to be manifest in the world in the organization of the institute of the church. This church as institute is put into the world by Christ in order that she may preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and exercise Christian discipline. This church comes together on the first day of the week for public and corporate worship. It is this corporate worship of the church which forms the context of the public prayers of the minister of the gospel.

Concerning this worship, Hoeksema writes:

Public worship must principally always be 'in Spirit and in truth.' This implies that it is not limited by a prescribed code of laws or rules that determine its external form, but is characterized by freedom, so that the form of public worship is controlled and determined by and is the proper expression of its idea, viz., the meeting of God with His people. God comes to His people to have fellowship with them and to bless them. The church approaches God to serve and to worship Him and to extol His glory. This also means that it is the worship of God as the God of our salvation in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit. In the Spirit of Christ we have the true liberty, which is not the same as wantonness, but which means in regard to public worship that the form and the principles of public worship are derived freely from the Word of God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Hoeksema, *Liturgics*.

Hoeksema goes on to say:

From these two parts of public worship, namely, *a parte Dei*, that God comes to His people to bless them, and the part *a parte ecclesiae*, according to which the church approaches God to worship Him, also follows what is its purpose. It is not missionary, or evangelistic. The purpose is not that of saving souls. The souls that unite in public worship are the saints, that is, the people of God with their children. But the purpose of public worship is, first of all, the public and united service and glorification of God with thanksgiving and joy in an orderly manner. And secondly, and in subordination to that chief purpose, it is the building up and edification of the saints, of the church; the strengthening and growth in the knowledge and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ of the people of God. Through the means of public worship, and particularly through the means of the preaching of the Word and of prayer, the people of God are strengthened in their faith.<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly John 4:24 is the decisive New Testament passage on the idea of worship: “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”

Jesus spoke these words to the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob. In an effort, undoubtedly to distract the Lord’s attention from the embarrassing subject of her fornications, she inquired concerning a matter of deep division between the Jews and the Samaritans: Where is the proper place to worship God? Is it in Jerusalem as the Jews claim? Or is it on Mount Gerizim (within view of Sychar) as the Samaritans claim?

While Jesus informs her that, as far as the question itself is concerned, the Jews are correct and the Samaritans wrong, the question is basically irrelevant because the time is very near when the *place* of worship will be of no consequence any longer. The only important question is *how* God is worshiped. If He is worshiped properly, He can be worshiped in a barn, a cave, the family room of a saint, a large and imposing cathedral—anywhere at all. The place is unimportant; the manner of worship is crucial.

Very clearly, Jesus contrasts New Testament worship with that in the old dispensation. While it is certainly true that worship in the old dispensation was pleasing to God only when it was accompanied by the inner spiritual humility which came from a broken spirit and a contrite heart, it nevertheless remained a fact that the worship of the church in the days of types and shadows was inextricably bound up with the temple.

This was of no little significance, for the temple, as we already noticed, was the typical representation of God’s covenant with His people, in which He was their God and they His

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<sup>8</sup>Hoeksema, *Liturgics*.

people. While Jesus informs the woman of Sychar that her question was important in its own time, the dispensation of types and shadows is about to pass away with Christ's own work which He performs, and only the inner essence of worship, covenant fellowship with God, remains.

But this true worship of the new dispensation is possible only because of the Spirit of Christ. The Samaritan woman did not really escape the subject to which Jesus had directed her attention when He spoke to her of the water of life, for that same water of life is the Holy Spirit which Christ will presently, after His suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension give to His church.<sup>9</sup>

The chief point of John 4:24 is that the worship of God's people must be of such a kind that it is in keeping with the very being of God Himself. God is Spirit. That is, His essence is spiritual. He is pure Spirit in His being. Worship that is pleasing to Him, therefore, is worship which is not bound up in outward form, earthly and material in character, dependent upon material things, possible (as in the old dispensation) only in certain kinds of buildings, with certain kinds of decorations, composed of certain kinds of liturgical actions. It is spiritual in the deepest sense of the word. This is in keeping with the nature of God. True worship, wherever it takes place, is the inner, spiritual activity of the child of God by which he enters consciously into the presence of the God of heaven and earth, there to have communion with Him.

Worship must also be "in truth." That is, worship pleasing to God must be in keeping with the truth concerning God. And, because the truth concerning God is revealed only in the Scriptures, it must be worship which is governed and controlled by the Scriptures. God is the God of heaven and earth. When the creature appears before Him, God determines how that creature must act in His presence. All worship must be, if it is in truth, a confession and expression of the truth of God's holy Word.

At the same time, worship is covenant fellowship. And covenant fellowship is holy conversation. It is evident on the surface of it that fellowship, in any sense of the word, is impossible without communication, conversation, two speaking together. Friendship—the friendship of intimate fellowship—depends upon conversation.

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<sup>9</sup>For justification of the idea that the water of life is a reference to Christ's Spirit whom He poured out on the church, see John 7:37-39: "In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)"

And so it is also in the covenant fellowship of worship where God and His people speak together.

This holy conversation of worship is not a chat between equals—something similar to two washerwomen chatting over the backyard fence. It is a conversation between the God of heaven and earth and small, insignificant, sinful creatures. This vast gulf separating God from us determines the nature of this holy conversation.

In the fellowship of worship, God's speech is always first because He is the sovereign Lord. His speech is creative, efficaciously operative, renewing and sanctifying, so that our speech is the fruit of His speech and gains its possibility and holiness from the power of His speech in us. This is the force of David's profound words in Psalm 27:8: "When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek." God comes with His powerful word operative within us: "Seek ye my face." That very word creates our joyful and obedient response: "Thy face, Lord, will I seek."

In this holy conversation which takes place in the worship service, there are times when God speaks and times when God's people speak. It is in this holy conversation between God and His people that the minister plays a role. No wonder that a minister who understands his calling takes this work seriously and often trembles at the thought of it. He plays a significant and important role in this holy conversation.

There are times in the worship when the people speak directly to God, as, for example, in the singing and in the confession of their faith. It is significant that there are no times when God speaks directly to His people apart from the minister of the Word. When God speaks to His people in this corporate worship, He speaks through the minister. He does this in the benedictions when the minister speaks God's Word of blessing; in the law when God says: "I am the Lord thy God who hath brought thee out of the land of Egypt..."; pre-eminently in the preaching when the gospel of Christ comes to the saints through the minister. It is through the preaching that the people hear the voice of their good Shepherd (John 10). But other times the minister speaks to God for the people. And it is precisely here where public prayers fit into the liturgy. The people speak to God in prayer, but they do so through their minister.

And, thus, with the minister at the very center, this awesome, magnificently miraculous wonder of the holy conversation of covenant fellowship takes place.

## Chapter 2

# Prayer in General

While the subject of prayer in general occupies an enormous place in the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God also gives considerable attention to corporate prayer, especially the corporate prayer of the church.

This is already true in the Old Testament.

The passage in Genesis 4:26, to which we have already referred and which contains the first reference to the public worship of God, undoubtedly refers especially to prayer when it speaks of men calling upon the name of the Lord.

It was especially in connection with the worship of God in the temple that we read of corporate prayers. In I Kings 8:22ff., Scripture records for us the beautiful dedicatory prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple, a prayer so rich in its mediatorial implications. In II Chronicles 14:11 we have the public prayer of Asa at the time of the invasion of the Ethiopians. Jehoshaphat's public prayer at the occasion of the invasion of the Moabites and Ammonites is recorded in II Chronicles 20:5. Solomon's prayer at the temple's dedication presupposes and speaks of other prayers almost as if prayer was to be an important part of the worship of God in the temple. The altar of incense was itself a symbol of the prayers of the people of God. God Himself refers to the temple as a house of prayer (Is. 56:7), a reference which Jesus quotes at the time of the second cleansing of the temple (Matt. 21:13). Many of the Psalms, all of which were prepared specifically for temple worship, were prayers by means of which the people of God entered into God's presence.

The Old Testament also includes some prayers which may have been public prayers, although it is not completely clear whether they are public or private. I refer to such prayers as Hezekiah's prayer at the time of the reception of the letter from Rabshakeh (Is. 37:14-20); and Ezra's prayer for forgiveness for the nation found in Ezra 9:5-15. While there may be some doubt about whether this latter was a public or private prayer, chapter 10:1ff. would seem to indicate that it was made, at least in part, in the presence of the people.

All of these passages indicate that corporate prayer was an important part of the worship of God already in the Old Testament.

In the transition period between the Old and New Testaments, the practices of the temple were continued. Thus we find the people praying in the outer court of the temple while Zacharias was in the Holy Place offering incense on the altar.

The New Testament church followed the pattern of the Old Testament saints. In its early history the church even followed the pattern of the Old Testament in using the temple for prayer (Acts 3:1, 2); but this soon became impossible and the church found other places of prayer.

Many references to such prayers are found in the book of Acts. Already prior to Pentecost the church prayed in connection with the choice of another apostle in the place of Judas. Acts 2:42, 47 describes the life of the early church in terms of prayer. Acts 4:24-30 records one such prayer made upon the occasion of the persecution of Peter and John. In Acts 12:5 we find the “church” praying for Peter, not that he might be released from prison, but that he might endure faithfully in the face of death.<sup>10</sup> Paul and Barnabas were sent out from and by the church of Antioch only after prayers (Acts 13:1-3). In Acts 20:36 Paul is recorded as praying with the elders of Ephesus.

Many other references are to be found in Scripture, in which it is not always completely clear whether public prayers are referred to. In Matthew 18:19 specific reference is made to the church. In James 5:16 public prayer may be the idea if indeed the passage speaks of the corporate life of the church; but it is possible that the personal prayers of the saints are especially meant. I Peter 4:7 may refer to corporate prayer, for, after all, the letter was written to be read in the churches. The same is true of I John 5:14, 15; I Thessalonians 5:25; Colossians 4:2; Philippians 4:6; I Corinthians 1:2; I Corinthians 14:16, 17. Revelation 8:3, 4 and I Timothy 2:1-3 surely refer to corporate prayers in the church.

From beginning to end therefore, Scripture speaks of prayer as being an important part of the worship of the church.

Anyone who reads the literature available from the early post-apostolic church will soon learn that the saints understood full well the clear teaching of Scripture concerning prayer in worship. We need not go into detail on the information available. One passage from Origen will show how prayer was assumed to be an integral part of worship.

Before a man stretches out his hands to heaven he must lift up his soul heavenward. Before he raises up his eyes he must lift his spirit to God. For there can be no doubt that among a thousand possible positions of the body, outstretched hands and uplifted eyes are to be preferred above all others, so

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<sup>10</sup>While commentators generally think that the church was praying for Peter's release, it is quite obvious that they were not; for if they were, they were praying with no faith at all, which faith is a requisite for prayer. When Peter appeared at the gate, no one would believe that it was he, but thought that it was probably his ghost.

imaging forth in the body those directions of the soul which are fitting in prayer. We are of opinion that this posture should be preferred, where there is nothing to forbid it, for there are certain circumstances, such as sickness, where we may pray even sitting or lying.<sup>11</sup>

This practice of public prayers was continued, although with the rise of sacerdotalism in what became the Roman Catholic Church, public prayers were increasingly formalized.

The Reformation changed this formalization of religion and, following the injunctions of Scripture and the practices of the early church, included public prayers in the worship service.

Calvin, e.g., included several prayers in his liturgy of 1542. After confession and absolution, a short prayer was made that God's law might be printed on the heart so that God's people would be led to obedience. Both before and after the sermon a prayer was considered an important part of the liturgy.

The practice of including prayers before and after the sermon was continued in almost all the churches in the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions.

William Heyns tells us that formerly the prayer before the sermon was the short prayer and the prayer after the sermon was the long prayer. But, he observes, this has since been changed around.<sup>12</sup>

If one consults "The Order of Public Worship," still in use in conservative Presbyterian churches, one learns that here too reference is made to two prayers: one before the sermon and one after the sermon.

In a certain sense, this practice is still followed in our churches, but the prayer before the sermon has been separated from the sermon in the liturgy and in content; it has become the chief prayer; and the prayer after the sermon has really become so brief that it is scarcely related to the sermon in any significant way.

In this connection, though we shall discuss the subject in more detail a bit later, it might be well to note that much discussion has taken place over the question of the relative merits of free prayers vs. form prayers. Generally, Presbyterians who have followed "The Public Order of Worship," have favored free prayers, and some have even protested strongly against any use of form prayers. Within Reformed circles, however, both have been used from the earliest history

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<sup>11</sup>Quoted from F. E. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Ante-Nicene Church* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1912), p. 131.

<sup>12</sup>William Heyns, *Liturgiek* (Grand Rapids: H. Holkeboer, 1903), p. 162.

of the Reformation. Calvin used form prayers already in his liturgy, and these form prayers go back to Geneva and the Palatinate.

The creedal tradition of both Reformed and Presbyterian Churches contain important statements concerning public prayers.

The Westminster Confession, under Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day, says,

Prayer, with thanksgiving, being one special part of religious worship, is by God required of all men: and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made in the name of the Son, by the help of His Spirit, according to His will, with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance; and, if vocal, in a known tongue. Prayer is to be made for things lawful; and for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter: and not for the dead, nor for those of whom it may be known that they have sinned the sin unto death.<sup>13</sup>

The Larger Catechism says that the duties required in the second commandment are:

The receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ...<sup>14</sup>

The Heidelberg Catechism, in discussing the second commandment, includes in the keeping of this commandment: “publicly to call upon the name of the Lord.”<sup>15</sup>

*The Church Order of Dordrecht* says that “the office of the ministry is to continue in prayer...”<sup>16</sup> Van Dellen and Monsma say that this refers to the public prayers in the worship service.<sup>17</sup> This interpretation is undoubtedly correct, for “continuing in prayer” is in the article directly connected to the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments.

*The Form for the Ordination of Ministers* used in the Protestant Reformed Churches has an important section in it concerning the matter of public prayers. In defining the work and task

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<sup>13</sup>Chapter XXI, 3 and 4.

<sup>14</sup>Question 108.

<sup>15</sup>Question 103.

<sup>16</sup>Article 16.

<sup>17</sup>Izard Van Dellen & Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1954), p. 75.

of the minister, it devotes one entire point to this calling of leading in prayer in the public worship of God.

Secondly, it is the office of the ministers, publicly to call upon the name of the Lord in behalf of the whole congregation; for that which the apostles say, we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word, is common to these pastors with the apostles; to which St. Paul alluding, thus speaketh to Timothy....”

Whereupon the *Form* quotes I Timothy 2:1.

The importance of this reference ought not to be overlooked. If we are inclined to think that we can simply ad lib public prayers when we come to that part of the liturgy, this section of the *Form* ought to give us pause. Notice, first of all, that this point says that such public prayers are “the office of the ministers.” That is, public prayers are a part of their office, a part of the exercise of the office. Carelessness or neglect with respect to public prayers constitutes malfeasance of office. Notice further that the minister solemnly agrees to these statements concerning public prayers when he answers in the affirmative to the questions asked him; for, while the questions do not directly refer to this point in the didactic part of the *Form*, nevertheless, by his affirmation he gives to the *Form* his full and heartfelt approval.

The conclusion of the matter is that these public prayers are bound creedally upon the minister as a part of his office.

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Many different words are used for prayer in the New Testament Scriptures. *proseuchomai* is the general word which includes all forms of prayer. *Deomai*, with its noun cognate *deesis*, refers specifically to petitionary prayer. In connection with *deomai*, different words are used for requesting God for certain needs or petitions: *aiteoo* with its noun cognate *aiteema* means “to ask;” *erootaoo* means “to request,” and carries with it a more intimate connotation than *aiteoo*. Two words which are used for worship are also used for prayer: *gonupeteoo*, which means “to fall upon the knee, and *proskuneoo*, the general word for worship in the New Testament. *Eucharisteoo* refers to prayer from the viewpoint of thanksgiving and praise; *boao* and *kradzoo* really mean, “to cry, shout,” and, when referring to prayer, express the idea of prayer as it arises from a great need or a great distress and which is a cry for help. *Krouoo*, which means to knock, is used by Jesus in connection with prayer in Luke 11:9. And, finally, *entugchanoo*, which means, “to meet, turn to, approach,” is used for prayer in the sense of intercession and pleading.

While we cannot enter into the whole subject of prayer in general, certain points concerning prayer are important for the subject of public prayers.

Prayers must always be made to the triune God. It is a mistake to address specific parts of prayer to individual persons within the holy trinity. Such prayers can easily become a kind of incipient tritheism. There is one only God, the true God, besides whom there is no other. That God must be addressed in prayer, and He alone. He, the triune God, is the Author of all the works of creation, providence, and salvation. He alone, as the triune God, is worthy of all praise and glory. He alone must be addressed.

At the same time, we come to the triune God only through Jesus Christ, God's only Son, who entered into our flesh to save us. We have both the right and the power to come to God in Jesus Christ. But only in Him are we to come, for He is our Mediator and High Priest who makes intercession for us, and by His blood we have access to the throne of grace.

The power of prayer comes to us through the Holy Spirit who is given to Christ at His ascension, who is poured out upon the church at Pentecost, and who dwells with the church unto the end of the world. That Spirit enables us to pray, for by the power of the Spirit we are made righteous, and through His work we know what to pray for as we ought.

Generally speaking, we are not to pray either to Christ or to the Holy Spirit of Christ; we are to pray to the triune God through Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit of Christ.

We are also to pray to God as our Father. We have the Spirit of adoption within our hearts whereby we cry, "Abba, Father." This is an act of great faith, for it remains the wonder of the ages that insignificant creatures such as we are, and sinners as well, are able to call the God of heaven and earth our Father.

By calling God our Father, we confess that we are His children. As His children, we come to Him to seek all things at His hand. He wants us to come to Him with our needs, not because in that way we make Him aware of what He does not know, but because He takes pleasure in our acknowledgment of His greatness and our confession of dependence upon Him. He takes pleasure in this because He sees His own work in us and is pleased with His work as it becomes manifest in our prayers.

While the name Father carries with it a deep intimacy, the scriptural teaching concerning prayer points us to the fact that the distance between God and us must always be preserved and maintained. Prayer is indeed the highest expression of covenant fellowship in which we speak directly to our God and Father. Within that fellowship is an intimacy which is rooted in the Father-son relationship which is ours through Jesus Christ. But that intimacy must not override

the fact that God is always God and we are always creature; that God is the Holy One and we are sinners saved by grace. The prayers commonly made by many in the church in our day are not intimacy but insolence; not reverence but blasphemy; not holy awe, but preposterous condescension. Men speak to God with less respect than they speak to each other. The child of God humbles Himself before the most high majesty of his Father in heaven, and confesses the intimacy of covenant fellowship with reverence and fear.

The words for prayer used in Scripture give us some indication as to the contents of prayers. Generally speaking, the contents of prayers can be divided into four main categories: praise and adoration, thanksgiving, confession of sin, and petitions.

The Psalms as well as other parts of Scripture are our pattern for praise and adoration. They point us to our calling to praise God for the great glory which is His and which He possesses in His own triune life; for the great works which He has performed in all the creation; and for the great work of salvation through Jesus Christ. If the end and purpose of our life ought to be the glory of God, it is not surprising that prayer expresses that glory in praise to Him who is enthroned in the heavens.

What prayer can possibly arise from the heart of a saint which is directed to God's glory and which does not include thanksgiving? The heart of the redeemed child of God is so overcome with the greatness of God's grace revealed in all His works that thankfulness rushes from him like a mighty stream gushing from a deep spring of water.

Psalms 116:12, 13 expresses this truth. The psalmist is so overcome with God's grace to him in delivering him from all his woes that he asks: "What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?" But, of course, there is nothing to give to the Lord, for the cattle on a thousand hills are His. And so the psalmist says: "I will take the cup of thanksgiving and call upon the name of the Lord." That is, he will express his gratitude to God; and he will turn to his God to ask for more. That is all he can do.

The Heidelberg Catechism, in discussing the necessity of prayer, speaks of the fact that prayer is the chief part of thankfulness.<sup>18</sup> Quite obviously, the Catechism means to say that all our prayers, no matter what form they may take, are expressions of gratitude. If we adore God's holy name, we do so in thankfulness that He is our God. If we confess our sins and seek forgiveness, we do so in the faith that He is ready to forgive, and that His mercies are abundant reason for thanksgiving. If we come with our petitions, it is because we express that we are the

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<sup>18</sup>Question and Answer 116.

children of our Father in heaven, so that the very act of coming to Him in our need (and to none else) is an expression of gratitude.

Yet, though prayer is the chief part of thankfulness, thankfulness is also an important part of prayer. An ungrateful child has no place in the throne room of heaven. God will not receive the man who comes without a sense of thanksgiving for all God has done.

Confession of sin is also crucial for prayer. The man who prays without confessing his sins does not know what prayer is. How often have I heard in dismay prayers brought to God, in which was not the least reference to sin, confession, or the need for forgiveness. The Lord Himself taught us to pray in such a way that a prayer for forgiveness was an essential part. It is through confessing our sins that we humble ourselves before the majesty of God.

Such confession, in turn, includes two elements. It includes a confession of sin before the face of God; but it also includes an appropriation of forgiveness by laying hold on Christ through faith and finding forgiveness in His blood.

Finally, petitionary prayer is important. In connection with petitionary prayer a problem arises.<sup>19</sup> Petitionary prayer has been interpreted as meaning that God will give us anything we ask of Him as long as we ask with sufficient faith, with great fervency, and perhaps with the help of others who are joined in some sort of “prayer chain.” Such a view of prayer has got to be some special abomination, for it presupposes that we can prevail on God to do something which He prefers not to do if only we meet certain requirements of faith, fervency, and crowd action.

It is certainly true that God has promised to give us what we ask Him, and that the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. But the point is that we must pray only for those things which He has commanded us in His Word to ask of Him. It is only then that we pray according to His will. God will give us what we ask when we pray in Jesus’ name. But to pray in Jesus’ name is to ask for what He has merited for us. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much (James 5:16-20). But Elijah is the example, and his prayers for famine and for rain are illustrations. It is obvious from the Scriptures that both were according to the will of God. God has Himself warned Israel that disobedience and apostasy would be punished by drought and famine when the heavens would be as brass and the earth as iron (Deut. 2:23, 24). And Elijah, though he prayed seven times for rain before it came, nevertheless was specifically told by God that God would send rain on the earth (I Kings 18:1, 43, 44).

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<sup>19</sup>C. S. Lewis, in an essay on *Petitionary Prayer*, speaks of a problem which he cannot solve: the seeming contradiction of Jesus’ promise to give us whatever we ask in His name and the obvious fact that we do not receive all we ask. C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948).

This command to pray only for that which we are commanded to ask for<sup>20</sup> does not preclude the fact that we are to cast all our cares upon God, knowing that He cares for us (I Pet. 5:6, 7). But, when we come to Him with our cares and seek things that are not revealed as His will for us, we must always pray with the third petition on our lips: “Thy will be done...” For it is in the will of our heavenly Father that we are saved.

Such contents as we have mentioned above belong not only to all personal prayer, but also to the public prayers of the pastor in worship. They are those elements which, just because they are biblical, are necessary for all true prayer.

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<sup>20</sup>See Heidelberg Catechism, Q and A 117: “What are the requisites of that prayer, which is acceptable to God, and which he will hear? First, that we from the heart pray to the one true God only, who hath manifested himself in his word, for all things, *he hath commanded us to ask of him...*”

## Chapter 3

# Some Formal Aspects of Public Prayer

### **Posture in Prayer**

No one, so far as I can determine, has ever made posture in public prayer a matter of principle, though preferences are often expressed.

Samuel Miller<sup>21</sup> mentions that posture is unimportant and unessential. He points out that Scripture mentions four different postures: prostration, kneeling, bowed head, standing; and he expresses a preference for standing. After raising various objections against sitting, he points out that standing during prayer was the apostolic and primitive way, that Nicea in 324 enjoined it, that this posture expresses respect and reverence, and that it is conducive to wakefulness and attentiveness.<sup>22</sup>

We agree with Dr. Miller that the question is not one of principle and we need not belabor the discussion of it.

It is not at all certain that every instance of prayer by the Lord and by the apostles was in the posture of kneeling or standing. We know, e.g., that the Lord sat to teach; and it is not unlikely that He also prayed in connection with His teaching in a sitting position. It is also true that on occasion the Lord reclined at a meal. If, as was His practice, the meal was begun with a prayer of thanksgiving, the prayer was undoubtedly made while reclining.

While Elijah was an Old Testament saint, we are told that he prayed for rain while sitting, if indeed this can be deduced from the posture he assumed as described in I Kings 18:42: "...he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees."

Certainly kneeling is appropriate in prayer, for one of the words for worship means exactly "to bend the knee towards" and refers directly to that posture which kneeling requires. But Protestant churches have had some reservations about kneeling in worship services because of its Romish connotations and implications.

I remember preaching in congregations of German origin in which the men stood while public prayers were made, while the women and the children remained seated.

Surely the matter of posture is a matter of Christian liberty. After all, one can (and ought to) pray regardless of his posture and even regardless of his activities. The mother can come to

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<sup>21</sup>Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer*, pp. 92, 93.

<sup>22</sup>Miller, pp. 102-104.

God's throne of grace while she is doing the dishes. The father can hold communion with God while driving on the road or working behind a punch press in the shop. Posture does not determine the genuineness of prayer.

Nevertheless, God has so created us that body and soul are closely united. Bodily posture has an effect upon the activities of the soul and its spiritual exercises. When people in church slump badly in their seats, put their knees on the pew ahead of them and their heads in their hands, they have assumed not only an attitude of disrespect towards God, but a posture more conducive to taking a nap than to praying. And when a minister, in the course of leading in public prayer, drapes himself over the podium, he assumes a posture conducive neither to sincere prayer that arises from his own heart, nor from the hearts of the saints whom he desires to lead to the throne of grace.

If the congregation remains seated during prayer, each person ought to sit upright, with hands folded in front of him and head bowed before God. If the congregation stands, those standing ought to stand upright, with hands folded in front of them and with bowed heads. The minister also ought to stand upright, free from the podium, with hands folded in front of him or on the podium itself.

### **Free Prayer vs. Form Prayer**

The subject of free prayer vs. form prayer has been a matter of no little controversy in the history of liturgy, and very strong sentiments have been expressed on both sides of the question. The controversy would almost certainly never have been so intense if it had not been for the fact that form prayers have been grievously abused in the history of the church. Form prayers were an integral part of Romish liturgy and even, in many instances, displaced free prayers altogether. This reliance on form prayers was only one element in an almost total formalizing of liturgy in the Romish church. The same thing happened in Anglicanism with the adoption of the Prayer Book.

Generally speaking, the proponents of free prayer (to the exclusion of all form prayer) are those who adopt what has become known as purity of worship.<sup>23</sup> The chief argument raised in

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<sup>23</sup>The name "purity of worship" is an unhappy one. Those who practice exclusive Psalmody, refuse to use musical accompaniment with the singing, stand during public prayers, and refuse to use forms in various liturgical functions do a disservice to those who do not follow these practices when they call their own practices "purity of worship." The obvious implication (and often stated conviction) is that all other worship is "impure," its impurity arising from the claim that all other forms of worship are violation of the second commandment.

favor of free prayer is that Scripture never refers to or gives any indication of anyone using form prayers. The fact that Scripture never speaks of form prayers is then interpreted to mean that only free prayers have biblical sanction.

So, e.g., Samuel Miller, though not making the matter a principle, nevertheless calls attention to the fact that all prayers in Scripture are spontaneous and unpremeditated.

The idea of free prayers stands closely connected with the refusal to use liturgical forms in connection with the administration of the sacraments and the performance of other liturgical functions, such as installation of office bearers, public excommunication, etc. The *Order for Public Worship*, e.g., which is used in some Presbyterian Churches, gives some guidelines for a minister to use when he addresses the congregation at the time of the administration of the sacraments, but contains no liturgical forms.

There are, however, some objections which can be raised against this view.

In searching for a warrant from Scripture one must be careful. The fact that the lack of form prayers in Scripture is interpreted to be a biblical warrant for free prayers seems weak: it is an argument from silence, and silence can hardly serve as warrant for a certain activity. That the apostolic church used no forms in its liturgical activities, if such is indeed the case, is understandable when we consider that the church was in her infancy and that no sufficient time had elapsed for suitable forms to be prepared.

But we find also certain inconsistencies in the practice of exclusive use of free prayers. Those who advocate purity of worship are quite insistent that in the singing the congregation remain as close to the exact wording of the Psalms as possible; and yet, completely free expression in praying is said to have the warrant of Scripture. This inconsistency becomes the greater when we consider that many of the Psalms, if not most of them, are prayers in their own right.

In any case, the distinction between free prayers and form prayers is, after all, a relative one. I have heard advocates of free prayers give nearly identical prayers time after time, so that, in fact, free prayers become form prayers invented by the individual preacher. And this is avoided only with difficulty when a minister must use the same basic ideas and even words over and over again. He is required to lead the congregation in prayer twice on each Lord's Day, and no minister's imagination is so fertile that in some limited sense his prayers do not take on certain form.

Van Rongeren makes an important point when he objects to the use of the expression "free prayer," especially when that expression is said to be the "outpouring of the heart to

God.”<sup>24</sup> He objects to this expression because it might leave the impression that prayers are really free, when in fact they are not free at all, for they are bound closely by the Word of God which alone governs all our prayers.

We consider briefly the arguments which have been raised in defense of free prayers as well as in defense of form prayers.

As we mentioned earlier, those who favor free prayers argue that form prayers have no warrant in Scripture, and are, therefore, not to be used.

This argument is bolstered by an argument from history. It is claimed that the post-apostolic church, till about the year 300, made no use of form prayers or liturgical forms of any kind. It was only with the decline of religion and the increase of an ignorant and uneducated clergy, that the church tended towards more formalism in worship and began to make use of form prayers. So form prayers entered the liturgy with a decline of spirituality in the church, with a growing tendency towards apostasy, and with the influence of sacerdotalism.

As we shall see in a moment, this argument has been challenged by others who have claimed that form prayers existed from the earliest times in the post-apostolic church. The evidence on this point is inconclusive.

From a slightly different point of view, it is also argued by some that inasmuch as ministers are permitted to use their own words for preaching, they ought also to be permitted to use their own words for prayer. This argument is an interesting one. It is usually set forward by those who practice what has been called “purity of worship.” But those who argue along these lines are also rather insistent that the singing ought to be as close to the exact wording of Scripture as possible. When it is pointed out to them that there seems to be inconsistency here, the argument is made that the laity do the singing, while a minister does the preaching and praying. But the argument is not only weak, but dangerous, for the laity hold the office of all believers and are surely to be trusted with formulating the Psalms in their own language.

Samuel Miller also argues that form prayers “tend to restrain and discourage both the spirit and the gift of prayer.”<sup>25</sup> There is, of course, truth to this. Form prayers, especially when read over and over, tend to become tedious and rote, and are no longer prayers made with the understanding. However, we must remember that this same evil may arise in free prayer,

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<sup>24</sup>G. Van Rongeren, *Zijn Schone Dienst* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre N. V., 1956). See especially pp. 70-81.

<sup>25</sup>Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer*, p. 125.

especially when a minister must offer many prayers in the course of his ministry in a congregation. And, while indeed this “formalism” is a real danger, the same can surely be said of the singing when a congregation uses the same song book for many years.

It is well to remind ourselves that all worship must be in spirit and in truth. This always requires great spiritual effort, and worship may become the opposite and sink into formalism no matter what the outward form of the liturgy.

It is also argued that no amount of form prayers are able to cover the variety of needs, conditions, exigencies, etc., which are present in a congregation.

This argument carries with it a great deal of weight. Miller gives an example of this.

A practical comment on this consideration was presented at the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States, which met in the year 1847. One of the clerical members of that body, in the course of its proceedings, stated that, a short time before, a pious and grateful mother requested him to offer public thanks to God, on her behalf, for a signal domestic mercy. He was obliged, as he stated, to inform her, that the Church had made no specific provision for returning thanks in such cases; and that he was not able to comply with her request. He, therefore, suggested, whether it would not be expedient to frame a new office adapted to such a case, and add it to the liturgy. His proposal was laid on the table, and eventually dismissed, on the distinct plea, that it was not desirable to favour *innovation*; that they had a liturgy venerable for its age, and sufficiently comprehensive for all desirable purposes; and that it was not wise to make provision in detail for such cases as that which had been proposed.<sup>26</sup>

One of the greatest objections to free prayer is its stifling effect on the freedom of the heart to express itself before God. It is argued that only when one stands alone before God can he truly allow the heart to express itself unchained. The outpourings of the soul, especially in times of great distress and urgency, cannot be brought to God through form prayers. Martin, quoting from Skoglund, writes:

What prayers gain in dignity and decorum (by the use of form prayers) they may lose in their being impersonal and unrelated to present needs. Such prayers stifle the creative urge of the leader who, in heavy-handed dependence on such written compositions may well lose his or her sensitivity to the present and pressing needs of the men and women in the sanctuary.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>27</sup>Martin, *The Worship of God*, p. 38.

He quotes too from early 17th century Baptists:

Because true prayer must be of faith uttered with heart and lively voice, it is presumptuous ignorance to bring a book to speak for us unto God.... Therefore we must not read when we should pray.<sup>28</sup>

Van Oosterzee suggests that congregations dislike form prayers and find it difficult to make these form prayers their own. He points out that in the Anglican Church, where form prayers are used almost exclusively, the people express their indifference and displeasure by coming into the sanctuary only after the prayers are over.

But many arguments have also been raised in favor of form prayers and it is worth our while briefly to consider them.

Those favoring form prayers lean heavily on history. They point out that form prayers were used in the Old Testament, although this assertion is made without proof. It is simply a fact that the public prayers recorded for us in the Old Testament were free prayers. The argument rests on the assumption that the temple worship was so regulated that form prayers alone were used in the service of God.

The early church is also said to have used form prayers, although, as we noticed earlier, the evidence is not conclusive and the arguments either for or against form prayers on the basis of usage in the post-apostolic church cannot be supported.

What is clearer is that Calvin himself prescribed the use of form prayers. Generally speaking, he gave three reasons for their use: 1) They provide help for the unskillfulness and simplicity of some. 2) The consent and harmony of the churches may appear in this way. 3) Capricious giddiness and levity of such as effect innovations may be prevented.<sup>29</sup> And, in keeping with the fact that the universal church through much of its history made use of form prayers, such practices today unite us to that universal church. But we also know that Calvin himself used many free prayers, some of which have been preserved for us.

It is argued, now from a different point of view, that an extempore prayer is difficult to follow because one must hear the whole sentence before concurring. Jeremy Taylor has said: "How can a congregation say amen to that which they have not considered?" Unless the minister

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>This material is to be found in Martin, *The Worship of God*, where Martin again refers to Skoglund.

who leads in prayer wanders about and jumps from here to there without any reason, this objection is rather imaginary. It falls away if the prayer which is brought is structured and biblical.

Form prayers are said to be a guard against heresy, for heresy can easily enter the church through prayer. We acknowledge the truth of this, but point out, on the one hand, that the same can be said of singing,<sup>30</sup> and, on the other hand, that the Anglican Church offers abundant proof that not only do form prayers not protect a church against heresy, but they may, in fact, perpetuate heresy and make the work of church reformation all the more difficult—if heresy is incorporated into the form prayers themselves.

Others have argued that form prayers prevent crude, inappropriate, and revolting expressions from being used. While this argument may in a certain sense be true, the solution to such an evil is not to revert to form prayers, but to bring proper prayers to God through careful instruction in prayer and preparation for prayer.

In close connection with the above argument, some have claimed that, even at their best, free prayers are often defective. They are defective in content, omitting things which ought not have been omitted and including things which ought not be included. They are defective in expression by virtue of the use of language unsuitable to prayer. They are defective when a minister falls into clichés and identical expressions. But here too the solution to the problem is careful preparation.

Preparation can also overcome the claim that form prayers, much more than free prayers, give order, unity, and beauty to prayers. It cannot be denied that even the Prayer Book, used in Anglican Churches, has many beautiful prayers in it. And no doubt a minister can learn from them. But the fact remains that free prayers need not be lacking in these virtues.

Most of the arguments for form prayers can be summed up in what Skoglund has written:

A congregation that knows only free prayer from the pulpit or desk is certainly at the mercy of what are termed “ministerial moods;” the people are exalted or debased according to the whim of the pastor whose own spirits may be either high or low according to his health, his feelings, or the weather. The same people may find themselves subject to a type of praying that is undisciplined, expansive, and plain rambling.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>It was said of the Arminians in the sixteenth century in the Netherlands that they sang their heresies into the church. This was done by way of introducing hymns or free songs into the worship services.

<sup>31</sup>Quoted from Martin, *The Worship of God*, p. 39, 40.

Perhaps one of the most powerful arguments in favor of form prayers is the argument that the Lord gave us the Lord's Prayer to use and indicated thereby that we are to use such form prayers.

Not all agree with this argument, however, and the proper use of the Lord's Prayer is a subject of much debate. Some even go so far as to insist that the Lord's Prayer may not be used at all, and that it was not given by the Lord to be used in the form in which He gave it.

Various different practices of the use of the Lord's Prayer have appeared in the history of the church throughout the years. Apparently the early church insisted on using it in every service, but especially when the Lord's Supper was administered. However, some scholars have claimed that this practice of using the Lord's Prayer in connection with the celebration of the Lord's Supper was due to the fact that the fourth petition, dealing with our daily bread, was spiritualized and made a reference to the bread of the communion table. In the Greek church it was regularly recited by the entire congregation, while in the Latin church it was recited only by the priest. Spain was a partial exception, for in the Latin church in Spain it was also recited by the priests, but the people responded with "Amen." In the Dutch churches it was used mainly in liturgical forms, while in the Scottish churches it was, in keeping with purity of worship, banned altogether.

The objections brought against its use can be summed up as follows: 1) The same objections as are raised against form prayers pertain also to the use of the Lord's Prayer. 2) The Lord never intended that the prayer be used in the form in which He gave it, but that it serve as a guideline for all true prayer. 3) It is evident from the prayer itself that it was not intended for use in the form in which it was given, because it is not made in the name of Christ, in whose name all prayers must be made, for we come to God only through our Mediator, Jesus Christ. 4) The use of it tends to make it stereotyped and prevents one from praying from the heart.

Nevertheless, we take the position that a proper use of the Lord's Prayer is permissible and even desirable. While it is perhaps true that the Lord gave it as a pattern to be followed in all our prayers, He surely did not forbid its use in the form in which He gave it. The disciples asked the Lord to teach them to pray and the Lord gave them this prayer. Hence, it can be used in the form in which He gave it.

It is true that an overuse of it may make the use of it mechanical and fulfill Luther's pungent words: "Overuse makes this prayer the greatest of martyrs." But this argument can be raised against any prayer, even free prayers. It must be remembered that anyone, no matter how saintly, is called upon to pray many hundreds of times under identical circumstances, and the

dangers of stereotyped prayers is always present to rob the believer of worship which is “in spirit and in truth.”

Van Oosterzee makes the point that the use of the Lord’s Prayer in connection with free prayers can make even poor free prayers adequate. He urges that at least one of the prayers in the worship service ought to be concluded with the Lord’s Prayer. In fact, he favored the idea that the practice once followed in Prussia be continued, that during the praying of the Lord’s Prayer in the worship service, the church bells be tolled so that the people who were unable to come to church might pray this prayer along with the congregation.

Thus we favor a limited use of the Lord’s Prayer, while receiving it at the hand of our Savior as the model for all our prayers. And we favor, generally speaking, free prayers in the public prayers of the congregation, while reserving form prayers for our liturgical forms. In the liturgical tradition of the Dutch Reformed Churches, some beautiful form prayers are included, especially with the administration of the sacraments. The fact that they are form prayers does not preclude praying to God from the heart—either on the part of the minister or the congregation.

However, if form prayers are to be used as a part of the administration of the sacraments (and other liturgical functions in the church), and if the Lord’s Prayer is to be used in the form in which the Lord gave it, then these prayers ought to be used as we have received them and not be altered, amended, broadened, or shortened according to the whims of the minister. And this is especially true of the Lord’s Prayer. To use it is pleasing to God. Who can deny that?

## Chapter 4

# Faults of Public Prayers

### Introduction

We come now to a discussion of public prayers as such. The minister is confronted with this aspect of his calling, that he must lead God's worshiping people in public worship, a part of which is his calling to bring God's people to the throne of grace. That this is a difficult task no one who has been called to engage in this task will deny. Even after many years in the pastoral ministry, a conscientious minister still feels the need for help in this high task.

A part of leading God's people to the sanctuary on high in a proper way is to avoid many faults that often characterize public prayers. Almost all those who have discussed the matter of public prayers have also taken the time to point out such common faults, and much of what we include here has been gleaned from others. But there are certain faults which we have observed ourselves, both in performing this part of our calling and in sitting in the pew and praying with and through the minister of the Word.

It cannot be denied that it is somewhat dangerous to discuss faults in public prayer. After all, it has been argued that prayer is that direct communion with God in which we who are God's children talk with Him who is our Father. We talk with Him in the intimacy of covenant fellowship. We tell Him all that is in our hearts as we seek at His hand the blessings which only He can give. To intrude on this intimacy with a discussion of "faults" seems presumptuous, to say the least. One would never think of listening carefully to a father talk with his son of the most intimate things relating to their love for each other, and then, after it was over, present to them both a list of "faults," both formal and material, which characterized their conversation. They would be singularly uninterested, and would, perhaps, be angry that you should overhear such intimate conversation with no other purpose than to criticize.

While there is some truth to this, two things must be remembered. There is proper prayer and improper prayer. God, because of who He is, has the absolute right to determine how we conduct ourselves in His presence. We may, in our prayers, be very wrong and sinful and make of prayer a kind of blasphemy rather than an expression of the deep blessedness of covenant fellowship. Our Father determines the rules to be observed in His holy sanctuary.

The Heidelberg Catechism speaks of "requisites of that prayer, which is acceptable to God, and which he will hear" (Q. and A. 117). Those requisites are: 1) That we pray from the heart. 2) That we pray to the one true God only. 3) That our prayers be governed by what He has revealed concerning Himself in His Word. 4) That we ask only those things which He has

commanded us. 5) That we humble ourselves in the consciousness of our sin and need before His divine majesty. 6) That we come in faith that, even though we are unworthy, He will give us what we ask for Christ's sake.

In the second place, the public prayers of a minister entail a special responsibility, for the servant of God who leads in worship is, in this part of his calling, required to lead God's people to the throne of grace. His prayers, both in form and content, must be adapted to serve that end. He is not alone with his God when he leads in public prayer; he comes to God in the name of God's people. He does not bring his needs and petitions; he brings the saints to God. It is in consideration of this calling that a discussion of possible faults is desirable. It is not easy for a minister so to pray that the assembled saints are truly brought to God, and that in a proper frame of mind and soul.

We have chosen, in the interests of order, to divide this section into two parts: faults in form, and faults in content.

### **Faults in Form**

Various serious lacks in public prayer can be found in the language which a minister uses.

Excessive use of favorite words and expressions ought to be avoided; clichés, stereotyped language, overly-familiar expressions are surely undesirable; similarities in sentences and form have a deadening effect; and all because such expressions tend to make prayer mechanical and rote-like.

It is difficult for a minister to avoid such repetitive expressions when he is called upon to lead his congregation in prayer twice on the Lord's Day, fifty-two weeks in the year. Nevertheless, he must strive earnestly as much as possible to make his prayers fresh and new, for the more mechanical they become, the more it becomes difficult for him and his congregation to pray from the heart.

One ought strenuously to avoid stammerings, stumblings, pauses, corrections, repetitions; in short, any lack of fluency which leaves the impression that the pastor does not really know what he wants to say and does not really know how to say what has to be said. Such a one quickly impresses people with the fact that his heart is not in what he prays, and when the minister's heart is not in his prayers, he cannot expect the saints to be more spiritual than he.

Wrong grammar and idiom must not be used, for such is not only offensive to many, but clarity of thought requires clarity of expression; and clarity of expression requires correct grammar.

In connection with poor and incorrect grammar must also be mentioned the use of provincialisms, solecisms (by which I mean particularly inappropriate language), and vulgarisms. The latter would surely include slang and street expressions which have no place in prayer at all, much less in public prayer.

Because clarity of expression is essential, vague and ambiguous language must also not be used. If the congregation is left to wonder what the minister means, it cannot very well be expected to join in the prayer being offered.

On the other end of the spectrum lies an equally deadly error, the error of oratorical, rhetorically beautiful, linguistically moving expressions. Only on the rarest occasions ought one to quote poetry; and to soar to great heights of rhetorical beauty is not the purpose of coming as a penitent and needy sinner to the sanctuary of prayer where God is upon the throne.

There is another point that must be made in this connection, although it has also to do with the content of public prayers. It has to do with the lack of structure in prayer, which can only be described as a grave and serious weakness. Samuel Miller comments on this point: "...a prayer in which...several departments should all be so mixed up together throughout the whole, as that they should all go on together in this state of confused mixture, from the beginning to the end, would, doubtless, be considered as very ill judged and untasteful in its structure..." Such a poorly structured prayer roams around aimlessly from one topic to another, has no unity nor progression in the thought, often returns to a matter already adequately treated, and leaves the saints of God who are attempting to follow such a prayer, hopelessly bewildered and lost. The evil of such lack of structure can only be avoided by careful preparation beforehand. It is the extemporaneous prayer, the off-the-cuff leading in prayer, that breaks down in structure. It must be avoided.

Sometimes a pastor, called to lead his flock in the worship of prayer, leaves the sheep behind simply because his prayers are too long. No matter how well constructed, no matter how moving, or how heartfelt the prayer may be, it is extremely difficult for the congregation to maintain an exalted state of mind and a proper mode of reverence in the worship of prayer for an extended period of time. Those who have considered this matter, oftentimes from their own experience, have agreed that about twelve minutes is the ideal, while fifteen minutes is the absolute maximum. Beyond that, the congregation can no longer sustain the spiritual frame of

mind which prayer requires. It is good to remember that prayers are made on this earth by people who remain of the earth, earthy and who find the spiritual exercise of transcending this world to enter into God's sanctuary difficult. To hear some ministers pray, one would think that the minister considers all his congregation to be already in heaven.

At the same time, too long a prayer reveals lack of preparation and discipline on the part of the minister.

Public prayers must not be hastily made. Not only ought a minister to refrain from speaking too rapidly in his prayers, but he ought also to guard against moving too quickly from one thought to another in rapid succession. This type of prayer also is difficult for the congregation to follow. It is better to deal with only a few topics and do so slowly, carefully, and deliberately, than to crowd his prayers with more than the congregation can absorb and still pray.

Sometimes prayers are made which speak of God in the third person. Instead of the minister directly addressing God and speaking to Him, he speaks **of** God. Instead of saying, "Thou art our Father and the Father of all those who put their trust in Thee," the minister says, "God is our Father and the Father of all those who put their trust in Him." The prayer changes, because of this third person address, from a prayer to God to a lecture on some theological point. Instead of praying to God on behalf of the people, he speaks of God to the people—even though it is within the context of prayer. I have been often surprised at how frequently this mistake is made.

Finally, it should, I suppose, go without saying that the minister's posture on the pulpit is important. He ought not to lean heavily on the podium and drape his form over it. He ought not to walk around while praying. And, above all, he ought not to use gestures. These postures are unsuitable. Rather, the minister ought to stand erect, with hands folded in front of him, and with head held up so that his voice carries throughout the auditorium. This will help inspire the audience as well to assume a posture befitting the sacred exercise of prayer.

### **Faults in Content**

There are many faults in public prayers which relate to the content—more, undoubtedly, than we are able to mention. While some outstanding faults ought surely to be discussed, it must be remembered that certain important principles determine what is proper content and what is not when we come to the throne of God's grace.

The principles of prayer which we already discussed are surely determinative for contents as well as for form. Some statements in prayer are simply revolting and repulsive to the humble

child of God who seeks mercy at the throne of grace. Familiarity, casual and offhanded remarks, statements more geared to getting people to laugh than to pray, facetious petitions, cavalier attitudes expressed in the words of prayer—all these are blasphemies which bring down God’s judgment upon those who practice them.

Never must the minister forget that he is praying in the name of the entire congregation. His personal petitions and needs belong in the prayers which he brings to God in his own inner closet. The needs of his family are properly the content of family devotions. The individual needs of members of the congregation are surely to be brought to God in the pastoral visits of the minister. Never must he forget in his congregational prayers that only that is proper which concerns the congregation as a whole. This principle must also guide our determination of what constitutes proper content in prayer.

When we turn now specifically to the common faults to be found in the content of public prayers, we limit ourselves to some that are most important and most common, and we do so in an arbitrary order.

It is a fault to make overuse of God’s names and titles in public prayer. It is possible, by such over use, to break the third commandment while praying.

I recall from my own youth an instance which will perhaps illustrate this point. While yet in grade school, my class (along with most of the pupils in school) were given a special chapel in which a missionary on furlough addressed us. I do not remember who he was, in what country he worked, or even what he said. But I do remember that, upon coming home that evening, I was asked by my father about the speech. When I informed him that I did not like it, quite naturally he quizzed me as to the reason. The only response I could think of was to say: “He used the name of God and of Christ too often.” My father was understandably puzzled by this, although he did not press me and I was unable to explain further what I meant. But the same lingering distaste remains. An overuse of God’s names can itself become a taking of God’s name in vain.

Included in this fault is the use of syrupy expressions such as “dear, loving, sweet, Jesus.” Van Oosterzee also speaks in this connection of overcrowding and inflatedness. He writes: “There is no need for acquainting the Supreme Majesty with all His perfections in a profusion of verbal display. With the piling up of countless rocks, the giants do not after all attain to heaven.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Van Oosterzee, *Practical Theology*, p. 407.

It is well to re-emphasize once again that our prayers must always be addressed to the triune God who is our Father for Christ's sake. We do not address, as is so commonly done, the three individual persons of the trinity. All too commonly prayers are addressed to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. This is a kind of incipient tritheism which ought never to characterize our prayers. All the prayers of Scripture are addressed to the one only true God, never to the individual members of the trinity.

Ordinarily, we do not address Christ in our prayers either. Nor is it proper to address the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ poured out on Pentecost. While the prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus," is surely addressed to our Mediator, nevertheless, we pray to God in the name of Christ and by means of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, for it is by the Holy Spirit within us that we cry, "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15).

It is a great temptation in public prayers to enter into too much detail and, as a consequence, make all sorts of trivia the content of prayers. Not only will excessive detail make our prayers too long, but the public prayers of the church are spoiled by a lengthy recitation of insignificant attention to minor matters. I myself have heard prayers of thanksgiving for a rather long list of fruits and vegetables and petitions for God's blessing on all the individual magistrates at the national, state, and local levels. It is not all that rare to hear prayers which are really a rehearsal of all church activities and a kind of bulletin board which expresses before God all that is happening and is expected to happen within the congregation in the ensuing days and weeks.

Nor ought prayers to be an occasion to report on the health and general well-being of the congregation: to mention those who have recently had or are about to have a new baby in the family; to bring the congregation up to date on the general physical condition of the aged or those who have recently been hospitalized—all those things can much better be left to the bulletin, where all these announcements properly belong.

At the same time, all that I have said does not mean that a minister is vague and indefinite in his prayers so that no one can figure out what he is talking about.

Sometimes, when a congregation or denomination is embroiled in controversy, or when some particularly difficult problems relating to doctrine or life are disturbing the congregation—oftentimes controversies which have not yet been adjudicated in the assemblies of the church—the controversial matters are brought into the congregational prayers in such a way that the prayers become partisan or are conducive to creating in the congregation a polarization over issues.

One ought not in his prayers to mention anything which suggests controversy of any kind. The minister ought to refrain from any language which would arouse party strife or antagonism among the members. He ought to be careful not to enter into polemics, not to use prayer to express his own personal opinion on matters at issue, not to say anything which would exacerbate already existing troubles.

There are many things inappropriate for prayers. A minister does grave wrong when he uses prayer to single out people and indirectly address them. This is sometimes done for purposes of flattery; sometimes for purposes of reviling; sometimes for purposes of attacking prejudices real or perceived.

Nor ought a minister to take what is basically a cowardly approach: to rebuke a congregation in his prayers by the indirect way of making what he considers wrong in his flock a matter of petition before the throne of grace. I have been present at family prayers where the father, during the evening meal, would spend a great deal of time in family devotions reprimanding each child in succession in his prayers for the sins and faults of the day. The same is sometimes done in the worship services when a minister takes that approach in congregational prayers.

It goes, almost without saying, that a minister ought never to mention private scandal or personal sins of which the congregation knows nothing when he leads the congregation in prayer. He ought not to use these prayers to mention any personal injuries or griefs which he has suffered or recently experienced. A well-known pastor in a well-known church in London once earnestly prayed that God would bring vengeance upon those in the congregation who were intent on making his life miserable.

In general, one ought never to make individual members of the congregation conspicuous either for good reasons or bad.

Wit and humor in prayer are totally inappropriate and out of keeping with the solemnity of being in God's presence. This includes witticisms, sarcasm, insinuations, ironies, etc.

Undue expressions of humility in which the minister speaks of himself as weak and unworthy are not to be used in public prayer. There are appropriate times in the private prayers of the minister to humble himself before the face of God. But by expressing his great humility in the prayers which he offers for the congregation he puts words in their minds and souls which he would not really want them to pray: "Lord, bless this weakest and most helpless and unworthy man." Sometimes one gets the impression this is done for an outward display of humility, especially when such expressions are overly humble and exaggerated. Van Oosterzee is correct

when he speaks of “no useless mention of the ‘humble’ and ‘unworthy’ servant, as which the speaker does not after all wish to be looked upon by the congregation.”<sup>33</sup>

It is also not at all unusual for a minister to make use of the vehicle of public prayers to compliment or commend someone. This is often done when the public prayers in a congregation are preceded by some special number sung in churches where choirs or soloists are the order of the day. Or it is sometimes done when a missionary or other church dignitary is present in the worship services. The minister may then use the public prayers as an occasion for mentioning the worth or services of a particular worshiper or the beauty of a choral rendition.

Sometimes at public meetings, not worship services, when a speech has been delivered, the person who delivered the speech is extolled in the prayers which follow. The difficulty with this practice is that one gets himself caught in a trap. If the rendition or speech was not particularly good, or if the visitor is not, in the mind of the minister, all that important, the minister is caught between the rock of being hypocritical by praising in his prayer that which he does not want to praise, or saying nothing; in which event, because he usually has commended speakers, it will immediately be correctly concluded that he looked upon the speech or rendition with displeasure. It is true, as everyone knows, that the line between gratitude to God for His blessings which come to us through men of God’s choosing, and compliments dished out here and there, is a fine one not always easy to draw. But it is better to be fervent and eloquent in prayer than to use it as a vehicle for commending people for their contributions to the cause of Christ.

We have already mentioned the great curse of so many public prayers in the familiarity with which the minister addresses God. Sometimes this blasphemy is excused by an appeal to filial intimacy. Dabney speaks of indecent familiarity introduced into prayer under the pretence of filial nearness and importunity. But he reminds us that filial and humble confidence is not presumptuous familiarity or unhallowed and intrusive familiarity, for “the wonder of Father-son intimacy is tempered by adoring reverence and tender contrition.”<sup>34</sup>

The point is that, on the one hand, we must come to God as children come to their heavenly Father, with confidence and boldness, with assurance and childlike trust. But, on the other hand, God always remains God and we the creature. The wonder of His great salvation must ever find expression in our prayers.

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<sup>33</sup>Van Oosterzee, *Practical Theology*, p. 408.

<sup>34</sup>Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*.

Finally, public prayers are not the place for dogmatic discussions. We must not misunderstand the point. Every proper prayer will be based upon, assume in it, be expressive and a confession of the great truths of Scripture. But this does not mean that prayer is the time to develop particular doctrines or engage in dogmatic discussions.

This happens especially when the minister gives a preview and summary of his sermon which he is about to deliver. He may and must come to the pulpit with his heart full of the Word which he brings. But he must reserve that Word to the sermon and not begin it in his public prayers. Prayer is not didactic in a direct way. It is covenantal speaking with God. Dabney writes to the point when he says: “A painful absurdity is our going about formally to instruct God of his doctrinal truths.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, p. 355.

## Chapter 5

# Proper Public Prayers

### Some General Remarks

While discussing what constitute the elements of proper public prayer, it ought to be obvious that we can speak of this only in a general way, i.e., not by laying down precepts and rules. Every minister must “find himself” in his public prayers. He must know his own strengths and weaknesses, and he must learn to adapt his public prayers to the occasion and circumstances in which he is called to pray.

When we speak specifically of the public prayers which the minister offers in the worship services, the question of the proper place of the public prayers in the liturgy comes up. What place these prayers occupy in the liturgy will determine in some measure their content.

When we discussed the history of public prayer, we noticed that over the years differences of opinion were not at all uncommon. But generally, both in Reformed and Presbyterian circles, public prayers have been made in close connection with the sermon, either before or after, or both. All the writers in the Reformed tradition going all the way back to Calvin mention that prayers before and after the sermon were the practice. In fact, some even insisted that the prayer before the sermon be relatively short, while the prayer after the sermon be the so-called “long prayer.” Within Presbyterian circles the “Directory of Public Worship” speaks of two public prayers, one before the sermon and one after the sermon. Dabney quotes the section from the “Directory of Public Worship” used in the Southern Presbyterian Church during his ministry, which contained the requirements of prayer before the sermon and the requirements of prayer after the sermon.<sup>36</sup>

The idea of all this was that the prayer before the sermon was to be made only in connection with the preaching and was specifically directed towards seeking God’s blessing on the preaching so that the hearts of God’s people might be opened and they might be blessed. The prayer after the sermon was a bit different. Some wanted to limit this too to the preaching so that it would include a prayer of thankfulness to God and a petition for God’s grace to keep His Word

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<sup>36</sup>Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*.

in the hearts of the saints. Others, however, wanted to broaden this prayer greatly and include in it all the other elements suitable to public prayers.

There are certain advantages to these old practices. The sermon is, after all, the center of the worship. God's people come together to hear God's Word above all else, and the position of the prayers in the liturgy emphasized this. We ought not to forget this important matter, and, regardless of where in the liturgy the public prayers are made, they ought still to call the people to the centrality of preaching.

But to relate the prayers directly to the preaching was also easier in some liturgies, such as Calvin's Strasburg liturgy, because confession of sin and absolution formed a separate part of the liturgy.

But here too the church must preserve a certain freedom in her liturgy. Scripture does not give direction concerning the place which public prayer should occupy in the liturgy. And, even though the place of the prayers determines in a measure the content, the matter of content must also be left to the freedom we have in Christ.

It is, on the whole, probably better to include in the public prayers more than prayers in connection with the sermon. The congregation comes together to worship by calling on the name of God. That which is important to the life and calling of the congregation must be brought before the throne of grace.

These public prayers are also important to bring the congregation consciously into God's presence. It is through direct calling upon God's name that the saints are carried on the wings of prayer into the sanctuary of heaven, there to have fellowship with God. But here too, it would seem that prayers which have this as their purpose could better be made at the beginning of the worship service; and this is perhaps why some churches do have public prayers at the very start of the worship of God by the congregation.

While, especially in our circles, not very much is made of prayers at the end of the sermon, this too is a fault. It may be that the minister feels compelled to utter only a very short prayer because he has used all (and more) of his allotted time in his sermon, and must now hurry in order to finish the final songs and blessings within the stipulated time. But such a practice is not good. It would then be better not to have a prayer at all. But the prayer at the end of the sermon ought to be given its proper due, and time ought to be allowed for such prayers. They are important in the worship of God as prayers of thankfulness, of reliance upon Christ, of earnest petitions for help in the week that lies ahead.

When we discuss what constitutes proper prayer, we are reminded that our Heidelberg Catechism gives us some valuable information.<sup>37</sup> The Lord's Day is talking here about all prayer, but it nevertheless gives us the teachings of Scripture on public prayers as well, since these too are part of the prayers we bring to God.

In asking the question why prayer is necessary for Christians, the Catechism already begins to discuss some requisites for such prayer as will be heard by God. Although we have briefly referred to this Lord's Day earlier, a few additional remarks will not be superfluous.

The Catechism teaches us, first of all, that prayer is the chief part of thankfulness. Although thankfulness is certainly a part of all prayer, this is not the point of the Catechism here. By our prayers, of whatever sort they may be, we show our thankfulness to God. In our doxologies and prayers of praise we demonstrate our thankfulness. But even in our petitions we show our gratitude for His salvation, for we express, by our petitions, our total dependence upon our heavenly Father and our desire to seek all things at His hand.

It is also important and necessary that we pray because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit only to those who ask for them. God has ordained that the way in which we receive His blessings is the way of prayer. In this connection, the Catechism makes two points about the requisites of prayer: Prayers must be made sincerely and continually.

Thirdly, prayer is necessary because God will give us what we ask only when we are thankful for His gifts. If we are not thankful, that is because we are not appreciative of what He bestows on us in free grace. We take His gifts for granted, squander them, become indifferent towards them, and even begin to despise them. To such ungrateful people God will give nothing.

In the light of these remarks about the necessity of prayer, the Catechism also discusses the requisites of those prayers which are acceptable to God and which He will hear.

One such requisite is that we must pray from the heart to God. Our prayers must be made in such a way that we are consciously in God's presence. They must be directed to God alone and must be in harmony with what He has revealed concerning Himself in His Word. How crucial and important this is. Our prayers must always express the truth of Scripture in whatever form they take.

At the same time, we must ask for those things which He has commanded us in His Word. Notice that we are *commanded* to ask for certain things. And this command we must obey. Briefly and by way of summary we are to ask for God's grace and Holy Spirit. So the

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<sup>37</sup>Lord's Day 45.

Lord also teaches us in Luke 11:13, a passage which is given us in connection with instruction in prayer.

We are thus limited in what we may ask for. We do not and may not come to God with all kinds of silly and frivolous requests which are demeaning to prayer, to God, and to our own spiritual life. How often is it not true that prayers in many churches degenerate into bringing a shopping list of things to God which various individuals in the congregation want.

The most trivial and nonsensical matters are brought to the throne of grace under the guise of genuine spirituality and seeking all things from God. But, as often as not, such prayers express nothing more than the personal wants and desires (often carnal) of individuals or congregations, made in the vain hope that “they will be heard by their much speaking.”<sup>38</sup> Prayer chains are even organized, as if by the intensity of prayer, by the number of people brought into the prayer, by the duration of the prayer, God will be persuaded to do what He had not originally planned to do; or, at least, that God can be prevailed upon to follow a certain course of action to which He had hitherto not committed Himself.

All such prayers are abominable to God. He knows what we have need of before we ask Him. We are commanded to seek at His hand His grace and Holy Spirit. These are, after all, the important things in life. For it is by His grace and Holy Spirit that we enjoy the blessings of salvation, have strength to walk our pilgrimage, and are able to keep our garments unspotted from the world.

Surely Scripture commands us to cast all our cares upon God.<sup>39</sup> But such must never be construed as a free license to impose our will upon that of our heavenly Father. He cares for us. And we bring to Him all our needs, our fears, our sorrows, our weaknesses and pains. We bring to the throne of grace our burdens which are so heavy to carry in this valley of suffering and pain. But we do so in the confident assurance that, whatever His way may be for us, we are sustained by His grace and Holy Spirit.

It is for this reason that the Catechism says also that we must come to God in humility. In order to do this, we must know thoroughly our need and misery. And how can we know our need and misery unless we confess before God all our sins and unworthiness? In the consciousness of our need for forgiveness and pardon, and in humble dependence upon God for

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<sup>38</sup>Matthew 6:7.

<sup>39</sup>I Peter 5:7.

all things, we come to Him who is able to give us that which we ask because He is almighty God, and who is willing to do so because He is our heavenly Father.

But we must also come in faith. The Scriptures underscore this again and again.

But what does this mean? Does it mean that we now, after all, have an excuse to ask of God anything we please as long as we firmly believe He will give it? This is what many claim. It is a great error in our day. And it has such an easy route of escape: if we do not receive what we have asked, the reason is because we have insufficient faith. But by this devil's ploy, the hearts of the faithful are distressed and robbed of comfort.

To ask in faith means to ask believing the Scriptures. We are to ask only for what God has commanded us in His Word. God has not commanded us to ask for what He has no intention of giving. But when we ask according to the Scriptures, then we ask according to the will of God. And when we ask according to the will of God, then we are able to ask in faith. God promises us grace sufficient for every trial. We may ask Him for that grace. Indeed we are commanded to ask for it. We may ask in faith, for He Himself has promised to give such grace to us. Relying upon the unfailing promises of the Scriptures, we go to our heavenly Father to have our needs filled at the fountain of living waters.

The Catechism is more expansive on this matter of what we may properly ask God for. It tells us that we must ask for all things necessary for soul and body; and it reminds us that what is *necessary* for soul and body is taught us in that perfect prayer which the Lord Himself gave us.

Such prayers will be received and answered.

### **Proper Form in Public Prayer**

We shall again divide our discussion between the proper *form* of public prayer and the proper *contents* of public prayer.

Perhaps a few remarks concerning the minister himself are in order.

While, as we have earlier noticed, a minister's posture in prayer ought to be appropriate to prayer, also the tone of his voice ought also to be in keeping with prayer's demands. The general tone of his voice ought to be devotional and an expression of his consciousness of being in the presence of God. At the same time, it is important that he avoid a *preek toon*, a "holy whine." There is not one tone of voice for preaching and another for prayer. There is not even one tone of voice for conversation and another for prayer. His tone of voice ought to be natural. At the same time, the minister ought to avoid in his voice flamboyance, oratory, and such

changes of tone, pitch, and volume which he might use in preaching. Calmly, quietly, and yet sincerely, he ought to bring the prayers of the congregation to God.

The minister must convey an air of sincerity, with all that this implies. Miller speaks of sincerity, faith, humility, a firm reliance on the Savior, and submission to God. Heyns talks about the fact that the prayer must be from the heart, as the heart speaks to God who is the fountain of living waters.

In general, the minister must always remember that he is the spokesman for the congregation in whose name and for whose sake he prays. Because of this, he ought always to use “we” and not the first person singular or the third person. Van Oosterzee, e.g., comments that one ought never to say: “‘A company of recipients of Thy blessings thanks Thee, a company of sinners acknowledges to Thee;’ this has much of the air of an official presentation or introduction to Paradise, in which the heart may easily have no part.” By the use of “we” is meant the congregation organically considered. That is, the congregation as united in the one bond of the fellowship of the Spirit. The true people of God pray, even though the carnal and wicked element is always present.

To attain these goals it is crucially important that the minister himself genuinely pray. He must himself be consciously in the presence of God. He must not pray for the sake of being heard by the congregation. He must not pray for the sake of pleasing a family, an individual, or a segment of the congregation. He must not pray with the secret thought in his soul: “I hope so and so hears this; he is sure to be pleased.” The attributes which make a prayer truly devotional are attributes which are present in a minister’s own heart. “Prayer succeeds when it melts into commitment and obedience; it fails when it is treated as a recital of our needs and an attempt to force God to act.”<sup>40</sup>

Concerning the prayer itself, a prayer ought to be reasonable in length. We have already called attention to this, but it is well to remember that too long a prayer becomes wearisome to the congregation. It is usually evidence of too much development of the thoughts, or the inclusion of too many thoughts. The minister must pray often in many public worship services. He need not exhaust his repertoire every time he prays. The words of Ecclesiastes 5:2 hold also for the minister’s prayers: “Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.” Jesus’ warning also applies: “And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites

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<sup>40</sup>Martin, *The Worship of God*, p. 37.

are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues...that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.... But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.”<sup>41</sup>

Public prayers ought to be characterized by simplicity. A prayer is not the occasion to be profound or to introduce the congregation to words they probably do not completely understand. Martin says that simplicity strikes a balance between profundity and “a convoluted or esoteric style of praying that leaves the people confused and threatened” on the one hand, and an “oversimplified kind of `nursery’” on the other.<sup>42</sup> In distinction from its being rhetorical and filled with high-flying language, it ought to express the heart of the child of God.

Orderliness in public prayers is a great virtue.

We have already pointed out that one objection to many prayers is their lack of order and structure. But the positive aspect of this question ought to be discussed.

Orderliness and structure in prayer does not mean that every prayer must fit into a rigid mold, and that deviation from such a mold is wrong. Nor does it mean that in every prayer the content must be the same, and these contents arranged in the same order.

But prayer must be characterized by cohesion, unity, and progression. Prayers ought not arbitrarily roam about from one subject to another without any apparent connection, as thoughts come to the mind of the minister. The requirement for structure in prayers includes several things. A prayer which is properly organized is one in which one thought leads naturally to another. It is in this way that the congregation will be more easily carried along by the prayer. It means that the various differing elements of prayer be grouped together: the doxological elements, the petitionary elements, the expressions of gratitude. And unity in prayer means also that within these main categories, the arrangement be orderly and easily followed. Cohesion in prayer means also that there is a certain progress in prayer from the beginning to the end so that the prayer moves forward to its proper conclusion.

The Lord gave us a model for prayer in the Lord’s Prayer. This model prayer is itself highly structured. The petitions are not arranged in an arbitrary fashion, but in a very definite

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<sup>41</sup>Matthew 6:5, 7, 8.

<sup>42</sup>Martin, *The Worship of God*.

order of two groups of three; and within each group, a definite order of individual petitions.<sup>43</sup> In addition to the petitions and their careful arrangement, the prayer opens with a specific address and closes with a doxology.

It is generally good that the order of prayers be along the following lines: prayers must begin with a conscious effort to bring the congregation into God's presence, something often best accomplished by including the doxological elements of prayer. This ought properly to be followed by confession of sin and prayer for pardon. The main body of the prayer, as with the Lord's Prayer, will certainly be the petitions and thanksgiving. The conclusion may surely be varied, but can very properly follow Christ's model and close with a doxology.

There are a number of remarks concerning proper public prayer which, while they can easily be included under the content of public prayer, can also be discussed under this general heading of form.

Prayer, as we observed earlier, ought to be addressed to God. But, while we stressed that prayer is the speech of the redeemed saint to His Father in heaven, we want here to emphasize that God must be addressed directly. Prayers in which God is spoken *of* instead of spoken *to* are all too common. God is either not addressed at all, or is addressed only indirectly. To use but one example, one ought to say: "We beseech thee, the only-wise God" rather than, "We beseech the only-wise God." If we do not, in our prayers, address God directly, we address the congregation about God. We, as it were, speak something about God to the congregation, but something which we want very much to have God hear.

Prayer must, in so far as possible, abound in the language of Scripture. The Heidelberg Catechism lays this down as a fundamental principle when it says that prayer acceptable to God is prayer addressed to the one true God who has revealed Himself in His Word; and is prayer which asks for such things as are commanded in His Word.

There are good reasons for this requirement. We know not what to pray for as we ought, and we are in constant need of instruction, which instruction can come only from the Scriptures. To follow Scripture is to be sure that we always pray what is right, safe, and fitting. Scripture is simple, eloquent, and eminently suited to prayer, and the congregation, familiar with God's Word, will the more easily be able to follow such a prayer.

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<sup>43</sup>Rev. Herman Hoeksema discusses this structure of the Lord's Prayer in both *The Triple Knowledge* and *In the Sanctuary*. The former is a discussion of the Heidelberg Catechism in which the Lord's Prayer is treated in detail as part of our gratitude to God. The latter is a book which deals specifically with the Lord's Prayer, but is a collation of radio sermons preached on the individual parts of this model prayer.

Two wrongs, however, must be avoided in this connection. We must not use the didactic passages of Scripture in the form in which they appear, for then we would be preaching, not praying. And we must not make use of inappropriate passages of God's Word -- that is, inappropriate for prayer.

In order to pray properly a minister must be steeped in the Scriptures. He ought to be so thoroughly immersed in the Scriptures that the language and thought of the Scriptures come readily to mind as he lifts up his soul to God.

It is well to remember that the public prayers of the minister must be appropriate to the occasion. This must, of course, be understood in a wider sense than we are discussing here. A minister is called upon to pray at many different functions in the church institute and in the organic life of the church. In all these functions, his prayers must be suitable for the occasion.

But also within the worship services, different occasions require different prayers. The congregation comes together to worship on special Christian holidays and in times of special distress or joyfulness for the church. During various worship services the sacraments are administered and special preparatory, communion, and applicatory services are held. While the Forms used for the sacraments in our churches have their own prayers (and it is wise for the minister not to attempt to expand on them), other services do not have such special and prescribed prayers. The minister must make his prayers suitable.

We might mention here by way of a parenthesis that it is sometimes common to connect the last prayer of the Forms for the administration of the sacraments with the public prayers of the church. This is often done, especially with the Baptism Form. We consider this a rather poor idea, for the sacrament should be a complete ceremony in itself. And the prayers which are prescribed in connection with the sacrament ought not to be merged with the public prayers of the worship service.

It is especially inappropriate to do this when the minister takes the occasion of the public prayers, added to the pray of the Form, to make his own petitions concerning the sacrament of baptism.

When we discussed earlier some "don'ts" of public prayers, we observed that prayers ought not to be a summary of the sermon, whether the prayer is before or after the sermon. But there is also a positive idea here which is worth noticing.

Prayers may surely be a way to convey the truth of Scripture to the congregation. In fact, it is an unusually effective way. But its effectiveness rests on the fact that it is done in a devotional manner and not in a didactic manner. That is, the ardent devotion of prayer may

surely (and, indeed, must surely) be a confession of the truth. But once again, it is well that the minister be warned against dogmatizing and theologizing in prayer “as if one wants to bring to the Lord the whole of Reformed Dogmatics, or display before the congregation his own orthodoxy.”<sup>44</sup>

Finally, in order to prevent prayers from becoming mechanical, the minister must strive for variety, variety of contents and variety of expression. But such variety is obtainable only in the way of careful preparation.

### **Proper Contents in Public Prayers**

We have emphasized earlier the importance for structure and orderliness in prayer. This stands related to the proper contents in prayer. Following the model of our Lord’s Prayer, it is clear that every prayer ought to have an address, a main body, and a conclusion.

Although the names and titles with which we address our heavenly Father may certainly vary according to the names which God Himself gave us to use, such addresses must express the holiness of God who is the Father of His people for Christ’s sake. In this way the Father-son relationship, characteristic of all prayer, is properly brought to the congregation.

The main body of prayer, the contents of which will particularly occupy us, is the important part of public prayers.

Every prayer ought to include a conclusion. Sometimes this conclusion can be in the form of a doxology, as the Lord Himself taught us. But the conclusion can also bring the congregation to the consciousness that the prayers offered are only in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the sole ground of all our salvation.

That a prayer concludes with “Amen” is right and good. But the “Amen” ought to be expressed clearly and distinctly, with the meaning which Scripture itself gives it, and as this meaning is defined in our Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>45</sup> It ought to be pronounced with emphasis on both syllables and with a long “a.” The word itself ought to express the confidence of the minister that God will surely hear and answer.

Even in the public prayers cautious and moderate use of the Lord’s Prayer is proper. Miller writes:

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<sup>44</sup>Heyns, *Liturgiek*, p. 163.

<sup>45</sup>Question and Answer 129.

As Presbyterians, then, we are far from objecting to the repetition of the Lord's Prayer in the public service of the sanctuary. The only question that we ask, is, what shall be the rule for its use? Shall we repeat it always—more than any other words or prayer that were ever uttered by our blessed Lord? Shall we repeat it more than once in the same service, as if there were some magic in its terms? Shall we insist on its repetition, even on occasions on which its language does not appear peculiarly appropriate? We think not. As we are persuaded that it was never intended by our blessed Saviour to be so invariably and formally used; as we do not find a trace of evidence that the apostolic church ever used it thus, or even at all after its establishment in the New Testament form, we cannot suppose the constant use of it to be binding. Yet we believe and teach that the occasional, the frequent (infrequent?—H.H.) use of it, is proper, and sufficient to meet every demand that the most scrupulous regard to the principle of Christian obligation can lay upon us.<sup>46</sup>

Once again we remind our readers that the contents of prayer will be determined in part by the place of public prayer in the liturgy and by the question whether the minister makes a great deal more of the prayer at the end of the sermon than is usually done. We believe firmly that the prayers of the congregation in worship ought to be broader than prayers in connection with the sermon. But the place determines in some measure the content.

Generally speaking, those who write on this subject agree that the following elements ought to be found in every prayer.

Miller speaks of the fact that public prayer ought to include adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition, intercession, and considers any prayer which lacks these elements to be essentially defective.

Heyns includes: confession of sin, adoration of God's perfections, thanksgiving for His blessings, petitions for God's help in our needs. He remarks that, because the prayers should be in connection with the preaching, the congregation should know, before the prayers are made, on what text the minister is going to be preaching.

We might remark in this connection that Heyns' point, well-taken, becomes impossible if Scripture reading takes place after the public prayers, as is often done in our churches.

He remarks further that confession of sin must not be particular, nor have reference to a particular person's sins, so that everyone knows who is meant; but confession of sin must be the prayers of the congregation. Such confession, therefore, includes prayers for forgiveness of sins for which all the congregation is guilty by virtue of a common human nature, and corporate sins

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<sup>46</sup>Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer*, p. 199.

of the congregation. In connection with the latter, the prayers of Ezra and Daniel form striking examples.

Heyns continues by pointing out that supplication must not be so phrased that the impression is left that we have to do with an unwilling God who must be persuaded to give His help. This is good advice, for God has told us that He is abundantly willing to give us even beyond what we ask or think; and a prayer of faith is a prayer of confidence and boldness.<sup>47</sup>

Martin speaks of praise and adoration as being first in prayer. This, he points out, leads quite naturally to confession of sin, which confession must be followed by forgiveness and absolution. Such a prayer leads in turn to thanksgiving, which is properly followed by intercession. He refers for this pattern to such texts as Genesis 18:22, 23; Daniel 9:3-19; Ezra 9:6-15; Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25; John 17.<sup>48</sup>

Van Oosterzee gives a very detailed description of the contents of prayers following the general pattern of prayers before and after the sermon.

He points out that prayers before the sermon ought to include: 1) Praise, which includes adoration, doxology, and thanksgiving. 2) Confession of sin and imploring of grace. 3) Supplication, including prayers for forgiveness, renewal, and sanctification; but also more particular prayers for such spiritual gifts as are necessary to provide the saints with the satisfaction of the needs which arise out of the life of the congregation or the circumstances under which the congregation lives and worships. 4) Dedication, which refers to the need to consecrate our lives to God.

After the sermon the prayers ought to include: 1) Thanksgiving for what was heard, along with a brief recapitulation of the sermon, and a petition for a blessing on the Word preached. 2) Intercessory prayer for the needs of the cause and kingdom of God and the needs of those with special trials. But always, Van Oosterzee adds, prayers ought to include only those elements which will receive the hearty "Amen" of the congregation.<sup>49</sup>

It might be well to pause for a moment to make clear what those who speak of absolution from sin mean. They obviously do not refer to some Romish notion of the minister himself pronouncing absolution upon those who have confessed their sins. They refer rather to the fact

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<sup>47</sup>Heyns, *Liturgiek*.

<sup>48</sup>Martin, *The Worship of God*.

<sup>49</sup>Van Oosterzee, *Practical Theology*.

that the minister must, after leading the congregation in confession of sin, bring the saints also to the cross by means of his prayers so that the congregation may, in prayer, lay hold on Christ and find in Him perfect forgiveness and pardon. This is important. The congregation must not be left wallowing in sins. The prayer of the congregation must be a prayer of faith, a faith that lays hold on the cross of the Savior. Only when by faith the people of God appropriate Christ can their worship be joyful and filled with thanksgiving.

In all this, however, we remind our readers once again that, while indeed these elements ought to be a part of public prayers, no hard and fast rules can be laid down. There must be freedom and liberty within the confines of the principles, that the point and purpose of all prayer is to lead the congregation consciously into the presence of God, there to worship before His face. What is conducive to that end is proper.

Turning especially to the petitionary part of prayer, it is well to observe that some specific petitions ought to be a part of congregational prayers.

A minister must bring the needs of the congregation that is assembled to worship before the throne of grace.

A few remarks seem to be appropriate at this point. It must be emphasized that the minister must bring the needs of the congregation as a whole. This requires that the pastoral prayers be, as a rule, somewhat general, and not overly specific. It is appropriate from time to time to bring the needs of specific segments of the congregation to the throne of grace, such as the needs of the aged, the parents, the children and youth, the single members, etc. It is also appropriate to bring the needs of the sick to God's throne in congregational prayers at proper times. But too much can be made of this. Sometimes prayers become a sort of medical bulletin board in which announcements are made concerning all who had babies within the last week and their medical condition, all who are ill whether with serious sickness or minor ailments, all who are in rest homes and nursing homes, with each mentioned specifically and by name.

This ought not to be done. Rather, great caution and discretion ought to be used in these things. In his book, *Sacred Rhetoric*, Dabney warns emphatically against making prayers too particular and making mention of particular names.

It is sometimes argued, and with justification, that the sufferings or trials of a particular member of the congregation are the sufferings of the whole body of saints, for when one member suffers, all the members suffer. And, indeed, there are particular trials through which a saint or a family is led by the sovereign wisdom of God, which make it urgent that a minister bring these

matters before God's throne as part of the public prayers. But caution and restraint must be exercised.

The bulletins are the proper place to bring the needs of the sick and aged to the attention of God's people, and God's people can be urged on the bulletin to pray for them. There is the practical objection that the minister must either pray for all the sick by name or for none—except the circumstances be unusual. Well do I remember being severely criticized for not mentioning the name of a member who was suffering from some sciatic pain in his leg. And parents have become upset when the minister has not prayed for their little boy who has recently had his tonsils removed.

There are also spiritual dangers involved. It is tempting to a minister to pray by name for certain individuals with the motive of advancing his own cause in the minds of his parishioners. It is often enjoyed by members in the congregation to have their names mentioned off the pulpit. And the minister who is willing to do this enjoys their special favor. Such motives easily arise. It is better to exercise great caution and restraint. The rule surely must be that particular afflictions in the congregation, or deaths of a striking kind, which affect the congregation deeply and are felt deeply by all, are properly the subject of congregational prayers. And surely sometimes the burdens that God is pleased to place upon His people are so great that they can be borne only when the congregation as a whole earnestly seeks God's help and strength for such an individual who is tried as by fire.

A minister must bring the needs of the denomination before God. Sometimes ministers tend to become parochial and, from the viewpoint of the congregation, self-centered. They pray in such a way that one gets the impression that their concern is only for the church of which they are a part, while little concern is expressed for the federation of churches to which the congregation belongs.

This is a serious mistake and an implicit denial of the unity of the saints in the church of Jesus Christ. Prayers must be made for those activities of God's kingdom that belong both to the church institute (theological instruction and the need for students, and missions), and the activities of the church as organism: Christian schools, Christian witnessing, etc.

In keeping with the need to pray for the denomination, it is also important to remember that the needs of the whole church of God must be brought before the throne of grace. After all, we are only a small and minute fraction of the great church and company of the redeemed gathered from every nation under heaven. We belong to a church catholic, and, on the Lord's Day, that catholic church here upon earth, in many different languages and from out of many

different cultures, joins together in songs and prayers to God on high. The church in any given locale must be conscious of this.

Abraham Kuyper speaks of the fact that no prayer in the church ought to arise before God without it including a prayer for the church universal. This kind of petition becomes emphatically true as we live in the end of the ages, for much of the church is in persecution, and the world becomes increasingly strong and bold in her attacks against the saints. For that church the minister must pray. Failure to do so will result in a congregation that begins to think that she is really the only important part of the whole church of Christ.

According to the injunctions of the apostle himself (I Tim. 2:1-6) we are enjoined to pray for the magistracy. Paul gives two reasons for this: 1) through the prayers of the church for the magistrate, the church is enabled to live quiet and peaceable life. 2) God is pleased to save magistrates too in addition to all other classes of people. Neglect to pray for the magistracy is a serious lack. In fact, it can be expected that where prayers for the magistracy are seldom made, the people of God will increase in disrespect for those in authority over them.

The question arises sometimes whether a minister ought to pray for himself in the congregational prayers. Some take this very seriously and consider a failure on the part of the minister to do this a serious defect.

It seems to me that the question is of little significance. It is not as if one sins by praying for himself. Likewise, it is not true that one fails in his calling by failing to pray for himself.

The congregation ought, of course, to pray for its pastor, and the pastor ought to be a man of prayer who also brings his own needs before the throne of grace. It is also true that the congregation, in its prayers for the pastor, ought to pray for him without ceasing, both in their personal and family devotions and in their prayers before the worship services. It is also true that a minister ought not to go to the pulpit without earnest prayers to God.

But we must remember that the minister who is faithful in his calling prays much over his sermon, prays in his study before going to church, and prays for himself before the service begins. The Consistory prays both at home and before the service that the pastor may faithfully and powerfully preach the Word. The congregation prays for God's blessing upon the minister at home and before the service. It is as if the preaching is carried on high by many earnest prayers. Then to make special mention of the minister's needs in the public prayers seems redundant and surely is not necessary.

It is always better for the minister, in any case, to retreat as far as he is able from the consciousness of the people, so that their thoughts may be concentrated on God and on the riches of their Savior. Prayers for himself could direct attention to himself.

At any rate, if he should choose to pray for himself, he ought to do so with extreme caution. Public prayer is not the time to come to God with personal needs, private spiritual struggles, confession of sin, and inappropriate expressions of humility. Let him lead the congregation as a whole to God.

This, after all, is the great principle that must govern all the contents of prayer. The minister must remember that he leads not himself, not an individual in the congregation, not a segment of the congregation, but all the saints of God assembled, to the throne of God's grace. That which concerns them all is proper in public prayer. That which does not concern them all is better left to other opportunities for prayer.

## Chapter 6

# The Minister's Role in Public Prayer

### **Introduction**

We turn in this last chapter to the minister himself who is called to lead the congregation in public prayer.

It might seem somewhat daunting to a novice minister not only to remember, but also to put into practice all that we have considered concerning public prayer. Coupled with his own sense of inadequacy as he ponders this part of his high calling, the whole burden of this work may seem too much. However, it is well that the minister consider that, although there are many things a pastor is called to do to pray properly, the most fundamental requirement is, after all, that he be himself a man of deep personal piety and a man of prayer.

Much can be said concerning the minister's calling to be a godly and pious servant in the Lord's vineyard. And surely the need for genuine piety is great in this day when altogether too many flighty, worldly, and unconscionably superficial men occupy the pulpit. Nevertheless, we intend to limit our remarks to the one aspect of piety in a minister's life, his calling to be a man of prayer.

The student who aspires to the ministry, as well as the newly ordained pastor in the congregation, can profitably spend time pondering that aspect of his calling which requires him to lead the church of Christ to the throne of grace. It is the church which he is called to lead to God's throne. It is that church chosen eternally, the apple of God's eye, the beloved in Christ; that church for which Christ shed His blood; that church destined to live in covenant fellowship with God forever—that church he brings in prayer before God. But, at the same time, it is the church of Christ in this world; a church beset by countless sins; a church weak and small, frail and helpless; a church guilty of bickering and divisiveness; a church sometimes too much enamored with the world and too little interested in the things of God's kingdom; a church in which appears every sin found in the world—that church he must lead to God. It is a church composed of old and young, of husbands and wives, of believers and their seed, of parents and children, of strong and weak, of poor and rich; that church, composed of such a variety of people that must be led to heaven to bow before the face of Jehovah. It is a daunting task. I could wish that someone had taken the time to tell me in my years of Seminary study what was involved in proper congregational prayer. It took much reading, much study, much worry and concern, and,

I might add, many not-so-good prayers to come to a point where this aspect of my calling can be performed with a measure of ease.

In his work on public prayers Samuel Miller distinguishes between the spirit or grace of prayer and the gift of prayer. He writes about the fact that there have been many extraordinarily gifted pulpiteers who have never been successful in public prayers, among whom he mentions Dr. Twisse, Rev. Davies, and Dr. Chalmers as examples. In distinguishing between the spirit of prayer and the gift of prayer, he writes:

1. By the *spirit* or *grace* of prayer, is to be understood that truly devout state of mind which corresponds with the nature and design of the exercise. He has the spirit of prayer who engages in that duty with serious, enlightened, cordial sincerity; with that penitence, faith, love, and holy veneration which become a renewed sinner, in drawing near to God to ask for things agreeable to his will. Even if he have weak intellect, but little knowledge of theological truth, and very imperfect command of appropriate language, yet if he have a heart filled with love to God, with confidence in the Saviour, and with ardent desires to be conformed to his image, a heart broken and contrite for sin, breathing after holiness, and earnestly desiring the enjoyment of covenant blessings—in a word, a heart in which the Holy Spirit dwells and reigns, that man has the *spirit* of prayer, the *grace* of prayer. Though his words be few, though his utterance be feeble and embarrassed, though his feelings be poured out in sighs and groans, rather than in appropriate language, he may be said to “pray in the spirit”—to pray in such a manner as will never fail to enter into the ears of “the Lord of Sabaoth....”

2. By the *gift* of prayer is to be understood that combination of natural and spiritual qualities which enables any one to lead in prayer in a ready, acceptable, impressive, and edifying manner; that suitableness and scriptural propriety of matter, and that ardour, fluency, and felicity of expression which enable any one so to conduct the devotions of others, as to carry with him the judgment, the hearts, and the feelings of all whose mouth he is to the throne of grace.

These qualities are not always united in those who lead in public prayer. On the one hand, there may be much of the *spirit* of prayer, that is, much of a spiritual and devout frame of mind; much sincerity and even ardour of devotion, where the topics of prayer are not happily selected or arranged; where the language is not well chosen; where the utterance is embarrassed; and where the voice is grating, ill-managed, and unpleasant. So that, while we have no doubt of the sincerity, and even ardent piety of him who leads us to the throne of grace, our pleasure in uniting with him is not a little diminished by the infelicity of his diction and manner. It cannot be doubted, however, that where there is a large measure of the *spirit* of prayer, there we are most apt to find, and commonly do

find, a corresponding measure of the *gift* of prayer. On the other hand, there may be much of the *gift* of prayer, where there is, so far as we can judge by appearances, but little of the *spirit*. That is, there may be much skill in the selection of topics, in offering up the prayers of the public assembly; much happiness of expression; much fluency of utterance; and much sweetness and solemnity of voice, where we have reason to believe there is but little of the spirit of fervent and elevated devotion.... The happy union of the *spirit* and the *gift* of prayer is the great object to be desired, and the attainment of which is so truly important to the acceptance, and especially to the usefulness of every minister of the gospel.<sup>50</sup>

It is probably true that some are blessed with the gift of prayer more than others; and the same may very well be true of ministers. Nevertheless, a minister may not be satisfied with poor prayers and justify his poor prayers with the claim that he lacks the gift of prayer. There is much he can and ought to do to make his prayers of such a kind that the congregation with him truly worships in prayer before God.

### **The Minister's Devotional Life**

After making his distinction between the grace of prayer and the gift of prayer, Miller goes on to say that the grace of prayer comes about only by a life of personal and private devotion. He writes:

That none can hope to attain excellence in the grace and gift of prayer in the public assembly, unless they abound in closet devotion, and in holy communion with God in secret. It is true that, without this, there may be much formal accuracy; much copiousness and variety, both as to topics and language; much rhetorical beauty; much that is unexceptionable both in matter and manner. But, without this, there will not, there cannot be, that feeling sense of divine things; that spirit of humble, filial importunity; that holy familiarity with the throne of grace, and with the covenant God who sits upon it, which bespeak one at home in prayer, and whose whole heart is in the exercise. To expect the latter without the former, would be to look for an effect without its necessary cause; would be to expect to see our deficiencies supplied by a constant course of miracles.<sup>51</sup>

Such a devotional life as is required for public prayer includes several elements.

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<sup>50</sup>Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer*, pp. 15-18.

<sup>51</sup>Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer*.

Such a devotional life includes, surely, a constant practice in prayer. The praying minister must be constantly “practicing” prayer in his own personal and private devotions, in what Miller calls, “closet prayer.” But such practice includes leading his family in devotions regularly, for this too is an important part of his devotional life. It includes the minister’s calling to pray with members of his congregation when the need requires; to lead his catechism classes and Bible study meetings in prayer; to rejoice in prayer with those who rejoice and to weep in prayer with those who weep. All are important.

One may wonder a bit whether the word “practice” is appropriate for prayer. But it must be remembered that prayer is a holy art, and that prayers which are heard by God must be according to the Scriptures. All this requires diligent attention to prayer, that we may be sure that our prayers, both as to form and content, are acceptable to God.

Such practice in prayer means also to learn what we must pray for. The minister must be a constant student of Scripture so that he himself always is the first to say, “Lord, teach me to pray.” That instruction in prayer is in the Bible. As he reads and meditates upon Scripture, he sits at the feet of Jesus who alone can teach His people to pray. He must live close to the Word, and the Word must seep into the marrow of his bones if he is to be successful in public prayer.

But one also learns from experience to pray. Not as if the Bible is sometimes not his guide in prayer. But the teachings of Holy Writ come alive in the consciousness of the praying supplicant when he learns, in his own inner closet, the strain of prayer, the pitfalls of prayer, the struggle of prayer, the wrestling in prayer, the difficulties of such specific petitions as, “Hallowed by Thy name” and “Thy will be done.” The minister who lives close to God in his prayers learns of the struggles of the soul in God’s presence. And all this is a school to prepare him for public prayer.

Many who discuss the subject of public prayer make a great deal of the fact that the minister prays as an intercessor. Some even go so far as to describe the calling of a minister as he leads in public prayer in terms of intercessory prayer.<sup>52</sup> In such writings little distinction is made between a minister’s private prayers and his public prayers, and all are considered intercessory. But this is a mistake. A minister’s public prayers are not, in the strict sense of the word, intercessory; and to make them such robs these prayers of their true character. A minister is praying as a spokesman of the congregation. He is leading the saints assembled to God’s

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<sup>52</sup>See e.g., Eugene Bradford, *Intercessory prayer: A Ministerial Task*. (Simpson Publishing Company, 1991).

throne. He, as it were, is gathered with the people of God before God's face. There, where they stand together, he speaks to God as spokesman.

It may be, of course, that in the course of such prayer he and the congregation pray for others who are not present. Then prayer becomes intercessory.

Nevertheless, it is important that a minister be an intercessor for the church. Part of his life as minister of the gospel, and part of his devotions outside the worship service, are the crucially important role of intercessor for the church.

Scripture abounds in examples of this. Moses, because he was a typical mediator, prayed often for Israel.<sup>53</sup> Joshua,<sup>54</sup> Samuel,<sup>55</sup> David,<sup>56</sup> and Hezekiah<sup>57</sup> all prayed on behalf of the people in which they served the Lord. Ezra<sup>58</sup> and Daniel<sup>59</sup> made beautiful intercessory prayers for God's people, prayers which can very well serve as our models. And Paul, in many different letters, wants the saints to know that he prays for them, indeed without ceasing, as he requires them to pray for him.<sup>60</sup>

If one studies these prayers a bit, one discovers that they are not public prayers, but private prayers, and that they are earnest and sometimes heartrending prayers for God's people. They are an integral part of the work of the minister, what one would call, an aspect of his calling.

They often express confessions of sin, not only of the one praying, but of the nation as a whole, or of the church of which the one praying is a part. They are, especially in Paul's case, prayers of thanksgiving for the saints (surely an indispensable part of a minister's life of prayer, for he who cannot give thanks for his sheep is not fit to tend them). They are prayers for various

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<sup>53</sup>Numbers 11:1, 2; 16:22; 21:7. See also his great mediatorial prayer at the time of Israel's idolatry at the foot of Sinai: Exodus 32:31, 32.

<sup>54</sup>Joshua 7:6-9.

<sup>55</sup>I Samuel 12:19, 23.

<sup>56</sup>I Samuel 24:17, 25.

<sup>57</sup>II Chronicles 30:18-20.

<sup>58</sup>Ezra 9:6ff.

<sup>59</sup>Daniel 9:3ff.

<sup>60</sup>See, e.g., Colossians 1:3-5, 9-14; Ephesians 1:19-23, 4:14-21; I Thessalonians 3:11-13.

blessings of salvation to be given to God's people. They are characterized by a deep faith, a profound humility, and a joyful gratitude. They have as their aim a higher spiritual life for the minister and the congregation.

These prayers are an important part of a minister's devotional life, without which he will never be successful in public prayer. He must learn to pray earnestly and diligently for the congregation over which God has placed him, for the denomination in which he labors, and for the whole church of Christ on earth of which he is a part. He must learn to pray with all the prayers which Scripture commands. He must make confession of sin for the congregation of which he is a part and in whose sins he shares. He must be earnest in thankfulness to God for God's unfailing mercies upon His people and for the marvel of saints who are purified in the blood of Christ. He must raise earnest petitions to God's throne for continued blessings upon the bride of Christ.

To pray in this way for the church, a minister must know his congregation collectively and individually. I say, collectively, because each congregation has its own "personality," its own character, its own strengths and weaknesses, which are the pastor's concern. But also he must bring the individual needs of the flock to God: the sick, the troubled, the aged, the children, the young people, the erring. Each must weigh upon the heart of the shepherd.

It is not an exaggeration to say that without such intercessory prayers a minister will never be successful in his public prayers.

### **Preparation for Public Prayer**

All who write on the subject of public prayer agree that preparation is crucial for the minister to carrying out this aspect of his calling.

Miller writes;

It is one of the main objects of the present volume to impress upon the mind of every young Presbyterian minister who reads it, this sentiment, that while, on the one hand, the reading or recitation of prescribed prayers is by no means the best method of conducting the devotions of the sanctuary, and is liable to many weighty objections; so, on the other hand, it is a great mistake to imagine that sacred attention to the mode of conducting this service, and preparation for it, can be safely neglected, or made the object of only occasional or superficial study; in short, that every Presbyterian minister who wishes to make the most of his services in the sanctuary, for the glory of God, and the best edification of his

people, is bound to pay a greatly increased attention to the whole subject of public prayer.<sup>61</sup>

W. Heyns makes the practical observation that free prayers do not mean unthought prayers, for there are so many things to pray for that the prayers must be considered beforehand lest they become too long, or something important be forgotten in them.<sup>62</sup>

Van Oosterzee gives specific reasons why preparation is important: 1) It will help the minister use proper language. 2) It will help avoid tautology. 3) It will prevent the minister from forgetting something important. 4) It will enable him to prepare himself spiritually for this part of the service and for the entire service.<sup>63</sup>

There are specific ways in which the minister can and must prepare for leading in public prayer.

One very helpful way is to read good books on this subject. Miller himself includes in his book a list of helpful books.<sup>64</sup> It is also helpful to read prayers of others which have been printed and from which one can learn much. At the end of some of his printed sermons, Calvin has included prayers which were made. They are exceptionally helpful and relevant today.

Surely one can do no better than to store in one's mind the language and riches of Scripture. Our prayers are to be in harmony with Scripture, and they will be most in harmony with Scripture when Scripture itself fills our minds and hearts. It is not only well to memorize many passages of God's Word, but it is also profitable to give thought to how one can alter the wording of passages in Scripture to make them suitable for prayer, while retaining their meaning.

Some ministers with experience advocate writing out prayers before the service. This is not for purposes of memorization so that the minister recites a memorized prayer; but it can well serve the purpose of determining beforehand the content of the prayer, organizing it so that it possesses structure, and formulating it in a way which is most edifying. With this suggestion I heartily concur, especially for the minister who is just beginning his work as pastor. At the same time, I urge those who follow this practice to throw away each prayer after it has been used.

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<sup>61</sup>Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer*, pp. 111, 112.

<sup>62</sup>Heyns, *Liturgiek*.

<sup>63</sup>Van Oosterzee, *Practical Theology*.

<sup>64</sup>Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer*, p. 216.

Miller mentions that, when a special dispensation of providence occurs then the minister ought immediately to make careful preparation to bring this matter into his prayers. This, too, is good advice. Such dispensations of providence would include the beginning or end of national war, a natural calamity in some part of the country, a particularly significant death, whether in the congregation or in the country, etc. Such occasions can properly be brought into the public prayers, but preparation is essential. If the minister waits for the promptings of the Spirit, he will say, at best, innocuous things, and, at worst, foolish and wrong things. But here too care must be exercised, for not every occurrence that reaches the newspapers or is material for the church bulletin ought to be the subject of prayers.

Preparation is considered so important by Van Oosterzee that he suggests that ministers get together to pray and mildly criticize each other's prayers. While perhaps the suggestion has some merit, one wonders whether it would, in practice, work very well; and if not used carefully, can quickly make the prayers offered mere tests of ability.

The point of it all is that the minister must give to this part of his calling very careful attention and must not neglect this part of his work.

Since the years I have spent in the Seminary have required of me that I worship from the pew, I have come to appreciate deeply the important place which congregational prayer occupies in the worship service. I have eagerly looked forward to going to church, in part, because I anticipated with relish the worship of joining with the congregation in prayer. It is a solemn moment, and yet it is a time filled with great blessing. But the blessedness of these moments of prayer depend so much on the minister who leads in prayer that the minister ought to give every effort of which he is capable to make the moments of the worship of prayer the blessing that they can be.

Not only, therefore, ought the minister to prepare his sermon with great care; not only ought he to prepare himself for his work with diligence; but he ought also to prepare his prayers, so that through them the saints of God may be led together to the foot of the throne of grace.

When congregational prayers are given their proper due in the corporate worship of God, the entire worship services are immeasurably enriched.

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*Psalter, Form for the Ordination of Ministers.*

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