

The Prayers of the People: What's a Pastor to Do?

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You surely heard the same death knells I did over the last decade or so—the ones being sounded over the liturgical life of the body of Christ. Dire diagnoses were pronounced from every side about the welfare of worship in the Reformed tradition. Some pointed out characteristics of stiffness and stuffiness and predicted a gradual demise due to irrelevance, a slow choking to death on tradition. Others looked with horror on fresh, uncontrollable outbreaks of innovation in preaching, music, and prayers and sensed (some even hoped for!) an imminent end to the public offering of worship by people of the Reformed faith.

They were in error, of course; worship is, in fact, showing signs of revitalization all over everywhere. Liturgies are manifesting new life, and enduring traditions are being appreciated afresh for their vitality and strength. Paradoxically, those pessimistic prognosticators are partly responsible, for they forced the church to pay attention to liturgical life and to examine its mutually dependent and interrelated parts. As a result, you can sense fresh winds of the Spirit blowing, revealing new possibilities for the various elements of worship and new insight as to their meaning.

Nowhere is the phenomenon more in evidence than in the Prayers of the People. Despite the confusion and inconsistencies that still persist regarding the purpose and place of intercessory prayer in public worship, the people of God continue to accept their responsibility to stand “before the Lord in behalf of all people. Our cries for help . . . are never for ourselves alone. Worship is no retreat from the world; it is part of our mission.” Public prayer on behalf of others is not only an absolutely essential element in the liturgical life of the church, it is as valid an indicator as I know for determining the spiritual health of any particular body of Christ. Prayers for God's world are not an option; they are our unequivocal responsibility. I hasten to add, however, they are not an onerous duty but rather the precious privilege of God's chosen people.

What follows is one pastor's reflections on the Prayers of the People. I share them in the hope that those among you who have weekly responsibility for leadership in services of worship will see fresh possibilities for public prayer as a means of grace during the Lenten season and throughout the liturgical year.

WHY DO WE PRAY THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE?

The term “Prayers of the People” refers to that particular type of public

prayer which is intercessory in nature—offered on behalf of others—and supplicatory and petitionary in style. It is sometimes labeled the “pastoral prayer.” A child in my church calls it the “long prayer”!

We do *not* pray primarily because of ourselves. We are in error if we assume our concern for others originates from some sort of inherently altruistic attitude or from an inborn inclination to care. Prayer, as with all the other elements of worship, is based primarily on our understanding of God, who is revealed in Jesus Christ as being completely trustworthy, absolutely involved with and in the world, responsive to the needs of its inhabitants; the God we see in Jesus Christ is the One who “is not deaf, [God] listens; more than that, [God] acts.”²

The Prayers of the People, if they are faithful, are never *self-centered*. They are *God-centered*, grounded in God’s faithfulness rather than our own. We dare to ask for mercy for the world because God first dared to act mercifully toward the world. The Prayers of the People are not our trying to get our way with God, our making up a wish list of benefits and blessings for various individuals, groups, and causes; it is an *offering* of evidence of our confidence that Almighty God continues to care, to show compassion, confidence that the world has not been and never will be God-forsaken. The Prayers of the People are their response to God’s revelation.

Yet, they are also *more* than offerings of evidence of our confidence in God who *once* acted on behalf of the world. They are authentic askings which expect answers, which anticipate God’s continuing to show mercy, continuing to alter the course of history, to “tilt the earth” toward justice and to fill it with gracious love. As George Buttrick puts it, they are prayers which ask God to change things,³ because we believe that God can and will be responsive to the needs of creation and that God’s power is stronger than any other force in all creation.

Finally, we dare to pray our often puny-sounding, seemingly superficial prayers because we trust that the wisdom of God is greater than any other wisdom. God knows our need better than we; we are confident that God will correct the errors we have made in asking:

We must still “cry out,” when the weaving of the tapestry of life’s terror and triumph seems to cut across our fondest hopes, for we are still creatures and defenseless. Then God sometimes denies: all . . . must die at last. But God sometimes grants the prayer because we offer it, guiding us through the answered prayer. Thus God enlists our prayers, together with our thought and labor. But as in closer and closer friendship we watch [God’s] weaving, our very petitions are redeemed, and we exclaim: “All Thy ways are mercy. In Thy will is our peace. Not my will, but Thine be done.”⁴

WHOSE PRAYERS ARE THEY, ANYWAY?

“Liturgy means ‘work of the people,’ but too often in the past, the liturgy gave the impression that it was the work of the pastor.”⁵ Confusion abounds,

and rivalry reigns when it comes to determining ultimate ownership of the Prayers of the People. Sanctuaries resound Sunday after Sunday with ministerial monologues, to which the congregation is invited to tune in. (I believe many pastors would be appalled if they knew just how many worshippers simply turned them off!) The *pastoral* prayer becomes the *pastor's* prayer, the people being made privy to the pastor's private concerns as they are vocalized over their heads.

There are several ways to clear up the confusion as to ownership of the prayer. One is to re-examine the form of the prayer. Litanies (with spoken parts by leader and people), bidding prayers with a moment of silent response, even sentence prayers (how well we remember them from Sunday School days!) are options. If the prayer is not *always* prayed by the pastor alone, the people can come to feel a greater sense of ownership.

Nevertheless, the traditional form is what *most* pastors and most parishoners usually experience in worship. How can the traditional pastoral prayer gather up the concerns of the pastor without excluding the people? The tendency is to attempt to solve the problem by creating even worse ones. The pastor, out of a desire not to leave them out, prays to the *people* rather than to God. The Almighty becomes the eaves-dropper, as the pastor informs the people as to what the nature and focus of their concerns ought to be.

Sometimes with a velvet glove, sometimes with a sledge hammer, the pastor's object is to get the people's attention, or, the goal can be to evoke guilt, to make a good impression ("My, how pretty the pastor's prayer was today!"), rather than to petition God on behalf of this love-starved, war-torn, hate-riddled world that so desperately needs the faithful prayers of God's people. The other tendency is for the pastor to resort to some sort of prayer style which will be a collection of individual petitions: an "each in his own heart, each in his own way" sort of thing. Certainly there is a place for private prayer in public worship, but it can never occupy a primary place:

In corporate worship it is the congregation that prays. Public prayer, rightly understood, is not the sum-total of individual prayers; nor is it the passive attention to the minister's private prayer; it is common prayer, the prayer of the People of God. It is the minister's duty and privilege, not just . . . to pray, but to lead a corporate act of prayer. [The] purpose is the same, whether [the minister] uses a set form or prays . . . *ex tempore*: [The minister] offers, on behalf of [the] people, the prayers of the whole congregation.⁶

What's a pastor to do? It is imperative to pray with *theological* integrity, to ground every word and every asking in what the pastor knows about the nature of the One to whom you will be praying on *behalf* of the people. Then, in lifting up the needs of the world, the yearnings of its inhabitants to be made whole, to be set free, to have hope, the pastor prays with integrity, confident not only in the efficacy of prayer but also in the willingness of God to answer the prayer.

WHEN DO WE PRAY?

A great many pastors like to get the praying over with so that the service of worship can conclude on a climactic crescendo of sermon and closing hymn. Yet, if worship can be understood as a drama in which all parts are interrelated, perhaps the place of the Prayers of the People needs to be reconsidered. If the heartbeat of Christian faith is always in the rhythm of God's revelation and our response, then *when* the people pray is more than a question of custom or convenience or the preacher's wanting to have the last word. It matters. In *The Worshipbook* Service for the Lord's Day, the Prayers of the People follow the sermon and the creed. Interestingly, that positioning is not an innovation at all; rather, it is in accord with reformed tradition:

Often the intercessions will come most appropriately after minds have been kindled, visions broadened, and sympathies stirred by the preaching of the Gospel.⁷

The place of the prayer has to do with revelation and response: revelation—the Word preached and read from the Scripture; *then*, the response—the people offering their prayers of intercession and petition. The Word becomes real for the people as the prayer relates the Word to real-life situations. It becomes incarnate in the midst of the human predicament.

My own pattern in preparing myself to lead the Prayers of the People, if I am not preaching, is to consult with my colleague who is to deliver the sermon and discuss his exegesis of the text and the direction he is being led in his exposition. Then, I study the texts myself. If I am preaching, I always make myself conscious of prayer and preaching as two components of *one* process—revelation and response. Rarely, if ever, do I find myself wondering what to pray for on Sunday. If there is a sermon to be preached, there is always a prayer to be prayed.

We are surely free to pray the Prayers of the People whenever we choose. Yet, how graceful our prayers can be when they flow in the rhythm of revelation and response!

WHAT'S THE ROLE OF THE SPIRIT IN THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE?

"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). The people of God and those set apart to lead them in the worship of God can hear no better news than this. We do not have to rely only on ourselves and our own resources. The Spirit is at work in us and in our prayers. On that, we *can* always rely. Herein, however, lies a great source of confusion. What happens is this: often human spontaneity is equated with Holy Spirit, and prayers prepared ahead of time are considered by some to be less faithful or less efficacious than those that burst forth on the spur of the moment. Surely it is true that non-spontaneous prayer can be lifeless and flat; but prayers improvised on the spot are subject to equally serious problems.

Who has not been subjected to spontaneous praying in a worship service in which the *pray-er* went round and round in a circle of shallow concern, subjecting the whole congregation to whatever happened to be his or her whim of the moment? The truth is, of course, that the Spirit can and does work in the process of preparation for the prayer as well as at the time of publicly offering it. Nevertheless, the fruits of the Spirit almost always spring forth more readily when groundwork has been done ahead of time: "To count upon the earthquake, wind and fire in the pulpit may be to miss the still small voice in the study."⁸

HOW DO WE PRAY?

Finally, I offer for what they are worth, some practical suggestions for the pastor who leads the Prayers of the People:

- Consider using varied and more innovative forms that will directly involve the people, remembering all the while, that the purpose of any part of a service of worship is to enable the people to worship God. (Don't, in your desire to be "with it," leave the people out!)
- Consider shorter prayers. Three or four minute prayers are more conducive to worshipful attitudes on the part of your parishoners than five or six minute prayers. (In other words, try to avoid getting carried away with the sound of your own voice!)
- Always be open to the guidance of the Spirit as you prepare and as you pray. Be willing to change directions, particularly in the pulpit, if you feel yourself being led to do so.
- Read other people's prayers devotionally. I have found the prayers of Michael Quoist and Henri Nouwen personally enriching and helpful in putting me in a prayerful mood as I prepare to write prayers.
- Use evocative imagery in the Prayers of the People; avoid abstractions. Make your prayers as *sensual* and *specific* as you can.
- Use active verbs and non-passive tenses. (Our faith is not in a passive God.)
- Outlaw "Let us" forever from your prayer phraseology; ask God directly!
- Do not tell God things as if God needs to be informed. ("O Lord, you know")
- Pray *personally*, aware that you are communicating within a faith relationship of love and trust, for the God to whom you are praying is not a distant object or a free-floating essence but the gracious One who has promised personal involvement.
- Pray regularly.
- Perhaps it would not hurt any of us to take a course on prayer, but I have found that the best way to learn to pray is by praying.

Finally, remember that you are yourself a member of the household of God, a part of the community of faith. Do not set yourself apart, but invite yourself in. Be *with* the people. Pray *with* the people. Communion with God

and communion with God's people are inextricably linked together. That truth is clearly made manifest in the Prayers of the People.

In churches characterized by liturgical innovation, in churches with traditional ways of worship, no matter *what* the style of the congregation, the Prayers of the People are *always* relevant; indeed, they are essential. They can no more be excised from modern liturgy than can the living body of Christ be removed from the modern world, a world more desperately in need of the grace of God than ever.

Martin Luther wrote in the sixteenth century:

For we know that our defense lies in prayer alone. We are too weak to resist the Devil and his vassals. Let us hold fast to the weapons of the Christian; they enable us to combat the Devil. For what has carried off these great victories over the undertakings of our enemies which the Devil has used to put us in subjection, if not the prayers of certain pious people who rose up as a rampart to protect us? Our enemies may mock at us. But we shall oppose both them and the Devil if we maintain ourselves in prayer and if we persist in it. For we know that when a Christian prays in this way: "Dear Father, thy will be done," God replies . . . , "Dear child, yes, it shall be done in spite of the Devil and of the whole world."⁹

It can be the same with us, today. Let the people and their pastors say **AMEN!**

¹ From "A Declaration of Faith" in *The Proposed Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* together with related documents (Atlanta: Materials Distribution Service, 1976), pp.165-166.

² Karl Barth, *Prayer, According to the Catechisms of the Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), p.21.

³ George Arthur Buttrick, *Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1942), p.79.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.107.

⁵ Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), p.9.

⁶ Raymond Abba, *Principles of Christian Worship, with Special Reference to the Free Churches* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 87.

⁷ From John Huxtable, John Marsh, Romilly Micklem and James Todd, *A Book of Public Worship*, Introduction, p.xiv, as cited in Abba, p.103.

⁸ Abba, p.116.

⁹ Barth, pp.9-10.