

THE CLEANSING POWER OF PUBLIC PRAYER



After a week in the world, worshipers may need our prayers as much as our preaching.

While I was a pastor, I became friends with a man who'd retired after many years as a reporter and editor for a major newspaper. Over the years he told me stories from his journalistic career — many of them humorous, others indescribably sad. The force of his tales came from the context of relentless evil in which they were set. My friend was a reluctant but frequent observer of human cruelty, greed, exploitation, and immorality. When I mentioned that fact to him, he did not disagree.

"After you've been in the news business forty years," he said, "you tend to develop a cynical and suspicious edge. You've heard every kind of lie, you've seen every species of corruption, and you've been witness to the sleaziest sorts of performances by folk the public thinks are saints and heroes."

I asked him how he maintained his spiritual life amid such an environment. "Don't you feel sometimes as if you're living in a cesspool? How do you

avoid becoming polluted inside?"

"I'm not sure I've always kept spotless," he responded. "By the end of the week, I've often felt like a dirtied-up human being. That's why when I head into church on Sunday I need something to clean me up — a spiritual bath."

This friend did more than anyone else to confront me with what it means to pastor on a Sunday morning. I realized his plight, while somewhat dramatic, was basically the same as that of most people who come to worship. Whether they know it or not, they also come out of a world saturated with evil. All of them need a bath. I began to wonder whether we provided it.

Years after being alerted to this question, I preached at a worship service led by a friend, Bishop George McKinney of the Church of God in Christ. It was clear he knew something about spiritual baths and the daily lives of worshipers.

Bishop McKinney appointed two elders to stand at the front of the sanctuary. One held a basket so worshipers could step forward and deposit written prayer requests. The other elder stood guard over a garbage pail. Into it worshipers were invited to pour their sin: either a written confession of attitudes and actions or the actual implements of evil from which people wanted to part. The pail often held syringes, pills, marijuana, stolen goods, and once, the bishop told me, a sawed-off shotgun.

Most of us are usually too subtle or cautious to adopt the bishop's methods. Perhaps we take too

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lightly the spiritual weight folk bring to the sanctuary on Sunday, and, sadly, too often we permit them to leave carrying the same baggage.

What to do with the "dirt" our people bring to church? As a preacher, my first instinct is to ask what my *sermons* might do for such a person. But one day it occurred to me that the "bath" is not necessarily in the preaching (although that is important), but probably during occasions I frequently neglected: the *prayers*.

It took me a while to realize the value of prayers offered during worship, perhaps because people were quick to comment on my sermon and only rarely mentioned the prayers. But as I got to know people deeply, I realized what they longed for (though sometimes were unable to express) was not so much for me to instruct them but to earnestly pray for them, to help lift their heavy burdens. They come each week wearied, muddled, and bloodied. Perhaps the most refreshing thing I can do for them is offer heartfelt prayer.

I realized I had never been taught, either formally or by example, how to pray effectively in worship. My public prayers all too often were little more than strings of religious phraseology. They were extemporaneous but over time developed a ritual quality of their own. Long-term attenders could almost predict what I would say. Painfully, I realized few people were even listening to the prayers in a service; it was a time for minds to wander, drifting back to attention when they heard "and we ask this all in the name of him . . ."

How had I come to that conclusion? Dare I admit, my own experience? I had to muster all my concentration to listen to prayers myself. It was eerie to ponder the probability that on occasion, a thousand people might be present when a person was praying aloud, and that *no one was involved in a word said*.

Perhaps this is one reason that in nonliturgical congregations we see increased interest in scripted prayers. The ones supposedly spoken "from the heart" seem to have little thought (and therefore content) behind the heart. Even my friends in liturgical churches, however, admitted that well-crafted prayers didn't keep them or their congregations from sometimes approaching public prayer in a perfunctory manner.

That's why I decided to ask some hard questions about the meaning and placement of the various prayers in a worship service. I wanted to be sure that each time we addressed Almighty God, we did so with the proper intent and content.

In worship, I discovered, there are at least six kinds of prayer to be offered on behalf of the people. The unknowing leader may confuse the six, mix their purposes, and diffuse the effectiveness of that "bath" my friend came to worship to receive.

Perhaps we take too lightly the spiritual weight folk bring to the sanctuary, and, sadly, too often we permit them to leave carrying the same baggage.

The Invocation

The first prayer of worship, usually called the *invocation*, has only one purpose: to invite and then acknowledge the presence of God among the assembled worshippers. To invoke is to request God's openness to the words and thoughts of the people. The prayer is to set aside this as a special time, a hallowed time unlike any other during the week. Holy activity is about to commence: worship, humankind's most important event.

The invocation is not a prayer for people or the issues of the present age, nor a rehearsal of the theological knowledge of the one praying. Rather it is a humble acknowledgment that those gathered look heavenward with thanksgiving, asking God's presence in what is about to be said and done.

My friends in liturgical churches say all of this in the concise "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen." While I may use a few more words, our invocations focus on the same thing:

We invite your presence, our Father, through the kindness of Jesus Christ. Having finished a week of work, of study, of play, we're here to worship, guided by the Holy Spirit. We have joined together to express our appreciation for the ways you have safely and lovingly led us. . . .

The Pastor's Prayer

Another prayer of the worship service, perhaps the most cleansing of all, is often called the *pastor's prayer*. In my pastorates, it became the one prayer of worship I steadfastly refused to delegate as long as I was in the service.

I deem the pastor's prayer on a par with the pastor's sermon. If the sermon is the pastor's opportunity to hold up the Word of God to the people, the pastor's prayer is the opportunity to hold up the people to God. It is not unlike those occasions when Moses interceded for the people of Israel. And it is the congregation's opportunity (and, I believe, privilege) to hear their pastor pray for them.

As a pastor I often invited my congregation to join me in the kneeling posture for this prayer. I made

kneeling an option, recognizing that some would have physical difficulty kneeling in a church without kneeling benches. I knelt on one knee myself and led the congregation from that position.

Kneeling or standing, I found it important to pray this prayer away from the pulpit. Usually I knelt at the head of the aisle. That proximity to the people provided a point of contact for us all. It made my sense of praying more real, and I suspect the people felt more keenly that I was one of them.

The pastor's prayer usually has four parts. In traditional liturgies, some of these parts may be separated into prayers of their own.

The first is an acknowledgment of God himself and his involvement in our personal and congregational life. We need to be reminded who God is — his attributes and actions. It is a time to reaffirm the majesty of God, to be reminded of the smallness of our world in contrast to his infinite dwelling place.

All week long our world appears larger and larger as it seeks to intimidate, dominate, and exploit. It would be easy for my journalist friend to arrive at worship with the unspoken notion that reality is rotten and undependable. He, like others, needs to be reminded of another reality, that God is not sullied by the machinations of a sinful race.

Thus, a pastor's prayer needs to center on at least one aspect of God and our response. Majesty, holiness, kindness, and power are merely a few examples.

Lord, in a world dishing out more than ample amounts of harshness, your kindness is a special reality to us. You treat us not according to what we deserve, but according to what we need. You give us gifts and capacities to enjoy the world you created; you give us abilities to love and receive love, to be able to forgive and forget. And most of all, you give us your Son, Jesus Christ. You are a kind God, our Father, and we love you. . . .

In contrast to such an affirmation, the second part of the pastor's prayer is usually clear confession that we are sinners, that our past week was marked with attitudes and actions that grieve the heavenly Father. This confession concludes in affirmation of God's forgiveness for all who are humble and contrite in spirit.

It is no accident that Isaiah felt an immediate urge to confess his sinfulness the minute he visualized the glory of God in the temple (Isa. 6). There is an



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unbreakable link between the two experiences. We help people by offering opportunity to face frankly one's sin and resolve the matter with God.

This is a special and most poignant part of worship. As pastor, I speak to God on behalf of my friend the reporter, leading him and others into God's presence with a realization we are contaminated with the sin of this world. Together we need cleansing; we need to know we are once again clean. For me this moment is both tender and exhilarating.

In Bishop McKinney's church, the choir sang a lively soul song after people had had a chance for repentance and forgiveness: "Jesus heard my prayer, and everything's OK."

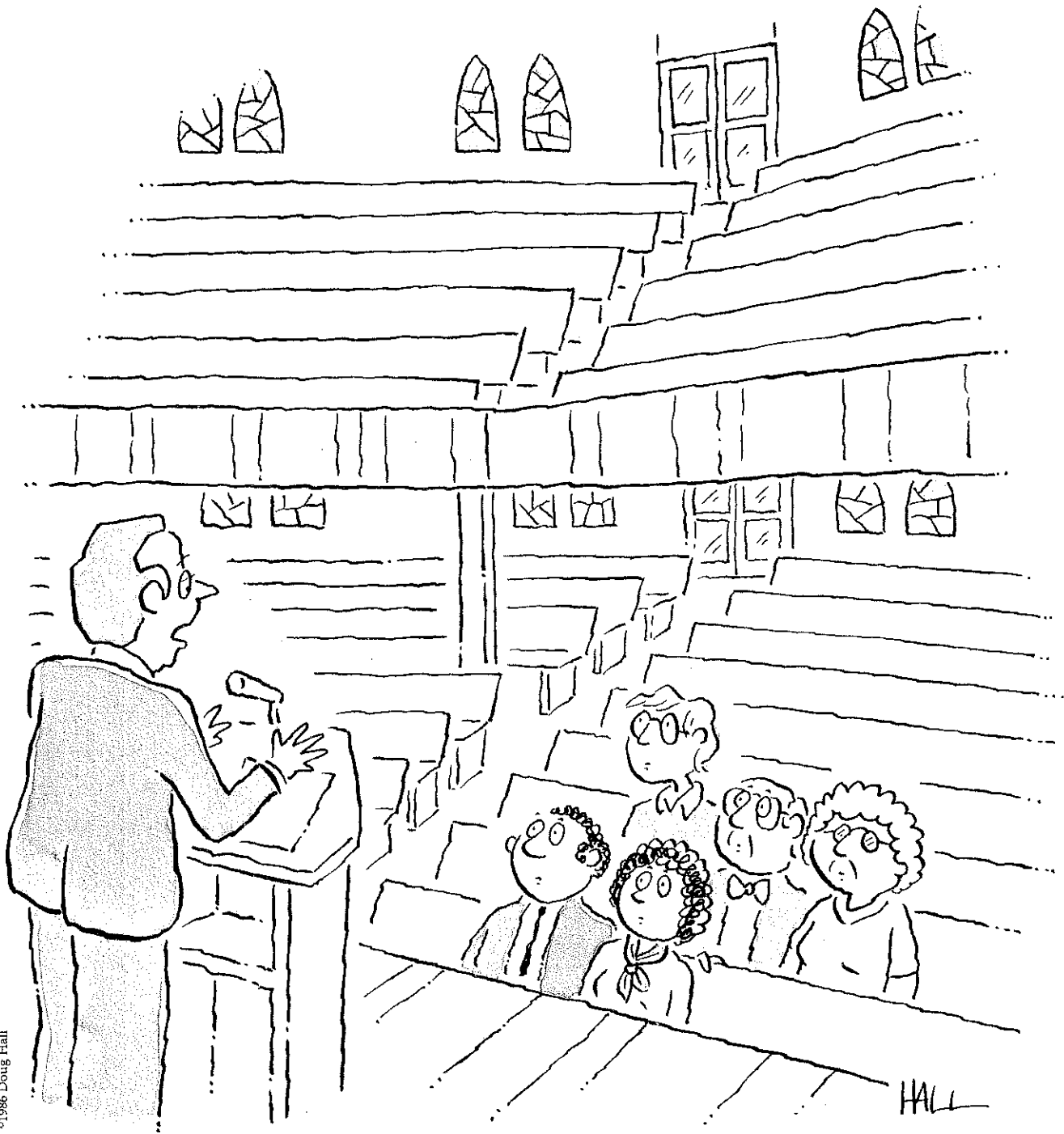
This part of the pastor's prayer is not something to pass by lightly. It admits our bent toward rebellion and the importance of the Cross in realigning the believer with the Father. Regarded properly, this can be a moment of liberation, of straightened accounts, for many who have come in desperate guilt and shame for failures in previous hours.

Who of us here, Father, would not quickly admit we have disappointed you on many occasions this past week? The thoughts and attitudes we have often nurtured are things for which we are truly sorry. We repent of them. Some of us could quickly admit to deeds done or not done of which we are frankly ashamed. Some of us have come here today, Lord, bearing resentments and jealousies that would be terribly embarrassing if others knew about them. We confess these, Father. We need liberation from our sins. Thank you for hearing our personal confessions. . . .

The third aspect of the pastor's prayer looks outward upon our world of revolution, starvation, disasters, elections, and achievements — the macro-events people hear about throughout their week. Somehow my prayer must put these things into an eternal perspective and model how to pray in light of such events. All of us need to be reminded regularly that each world event concerns the Father and therefore must concern his children. Not to pray for these matters is to infer by silence that what happens in the sanctuary has no relevance to affairs during the other six days of the week. As a pastor, I found it important to make sure that on the way to church each Sunday morning I heard the latest news broadcast to be sure my prayer agenda was up to date.

A part of our world hurts today, Lord. Men and women who think and feel just like us have no homes, no food, nothing to provide for their children's welfare. Father, many grieve today over the loss of loved ones in a tragic accident. Presidents and prime ministers engage one another today, Lord; they desperately need wisdom. . . .

The final part of the pastor's prayer centers on the needs of the people themselves. I have rarely come to this point of the prayer without remembering the story Henri Nouwen tells of the abbot of a Trappist monastery who met his monks as they returned



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*"God calls us to evangelism!
The bank that holds our mortgage has mentioned it, too."*

from the fields each evening, dirtied and wearied. As they approached, he would raise both arms to receive them and cry out, "Are any of you in trouble?" It was a time for each to pause, to reflect upon anything amiss within the heart or among relationships, and to find relief in God's promised kindness and grace.

The pastor's prayer, therefore, is a prayer for those who are in trouble and know it—for the worker who fears the loss of a job, for the person facing a doctor's appointment and potentially bad news, for parents raising children who do not seem to like them, for the single woman who is desperately lonely, for the teenager worrying about his sexual-

ity. Mentioning such needs each week helps people in the pews sense their individual needs are being offered up, even if not specifically mentioned. Here we hold up arms for those in trouble. If we speak in tenderness, in hope, in authenticity (meaning real words describing real situations), and with urgency, the people will know they have been spiritually bathed.

Father, some of us came here in deep pain: the pain of the body, the pain of wounded relationships, the pain of pure, unrelenting fear. Father, some of us badly need help and encouragement. . . .

Wise pastors also intercede for various ministries in the congregation, not all of them at once, of course, but one each week perhaps.

The pastor's prayer can often be concluded with a song by the congregation. Some of my most memorable occasions were when we sang the Lord's Prayer without instruments. The sense of being welded together before the throne of God lingered with me for many days afterward.

In smaller congregations, parts of the pastor's prayer can be shared with the congregation in what is sometimes called "conversational prayer." When our sanctuary was smaller, I occasionally invited worshipers to stand and read one (I carefully held them to one) verse of Scripture that exalted the living God. What often happened was a beautiful mosaic of verses that directed our thoughts to many aspects of God's being and purposes.

Equally memorable were invitations to the congregation to stand and speak *one* sentence of praise to the Lord. I found it important to give specific instructions ahead of time in order to fend off the one or two folk who might dominate the occasion. On the other hand, those not used to public prayer were encouraged to participate, since the requirement was only one sentence.

Dedication of Gifts

A third prayer of the worship service usually comes before or after the offering.

Recently I sat in a congregation where the offering was received by ushers, an equal number of men and women. Afterward the ushers walked to the front and held the plates high above their heads to offer them to the Father. We sang the Doxology and then were led in prayer by one who understood the money in the plates symbolized our week's labor. It was a touching moment.

What was this prayer doing? It was applying meaning and value to our work. We were saying, "We offer you, Father, the first fruits of our work." The pastor who prayed used words that let us know he was aware that we had worked hard, that the

dollars in the plate had not come easily, that to give them was an act of cheerful obedience. I was impressed that the pastor who dedicated our gifts took them seriously, not as income for the church budget or benevolence program but rather as the fruits of our work.

Some of us who are here today, our Father, are tired and bruised because we've had a hard week of work. But we have done our best at jobs that are sometimes exciting, sometimes boring. We have joyfully brought the evidence of our labor, and we present to you today a portion of what you have made possible for us to earn. . . .

The Prayer of Illumination and Submission

Scripture is not fully appreciated without the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit searching the heart, applying truth, bringing people to conviction. Thus, another possible prayer in the worship service is the prayer of submission to the Word of God.

In some liturgical services, it is common for the congregation to sing a hymn before the sermon. During the singing, the preacher kneels and prays for himself. As he consecrates himself to the work of the Spirit, the congregation becomes aware the preacher works under divine accountability and what they are about to hear is God's living Word for them.

This same preacher may call the congregation to prayerful attention as he opens the Scriptures. In this brief moment, all are commended to the work of the Holy Spirit and are caused to listen in submission to the Scriptures.

The time has come for us to open the Scripture, Lord, to listen to your voice as it comes to us through the inspiring work of the Holy Spirit. Give us an ability to hear what is important and to place it into our experiences. We submit to your insight and guidance. . . .

Prayer of Decision and Invitation

Assuming that a sermon connects God's Word to a worshiper's life, it is appropriate for the worship leader to end a sermon with a reflective prayer, focusing on the desired response. Silence is helpful here, giving the listener a chance to think through what he or she will do about what has been said.

Occasionally, I have used this time to give an old-fashioned invitation — a call to convicted people to walk to the front and kneel as a public act of commitment. But I never give such an invitation unless I have explained the procedure *before* the sermon. In a culture unaccustomed to revivalistic tradition, the idea of leaving your seat before the service is over and going to the front of the sanctuary is foreign. People need to know what will happen — that some-

one is prepared to join them and pray for them. This allows people to think through their response as the sermon is preached.

If not an invitation to personal prayers of commitment, then a sermon can end with a brief, reflective prayer, one that calls the listener to a point of closure. This prayer should not be a review of the sermon's major points but a petition that God's Word might be clear to each worshiper and properly applied to life.

All of us — beginning with myself — are startled with the richness of these truths, Father. They call us to something higher and more powerful than we've ever known. We need to do something about what you've said to us today. Help us to discover what that could be. . . .

The Final Ascription

Sometimes called a benediction, this is the concluding prayer in most worship services. All too often it is merely a signal that a service is almost over; people use the time to put away hymnbooks, grab coats, or even get a head start to the parking lot.

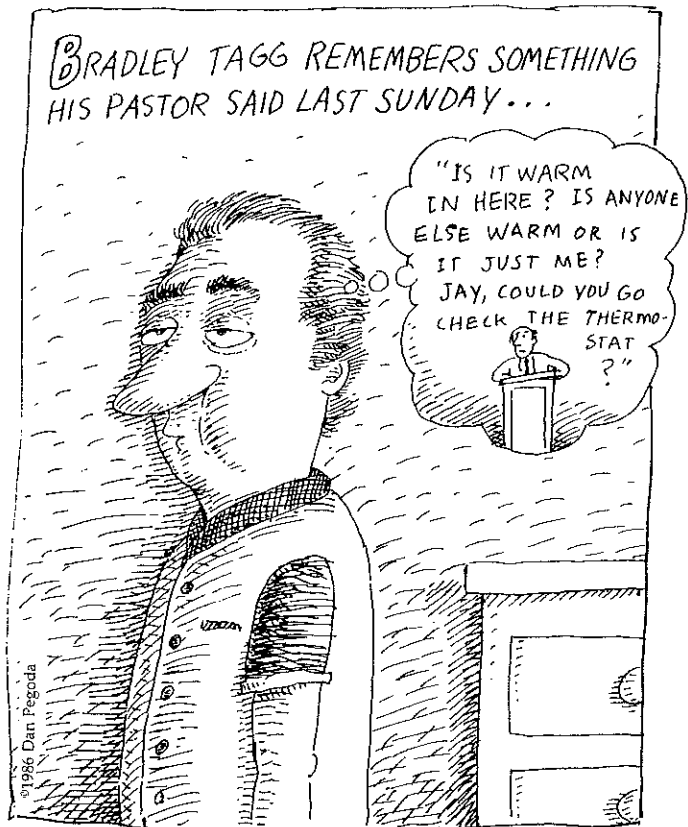
We are not merely closing a service with prayer. Rather, we are offering a final affirmation of blessing upon people and thanksgiving to God for having been present.

The prayer should be brief. It need not rehearse the events of the morning but simply acknowledge God's faithfulness and pronounce his blessing, as the traditional biblical benedictions do. Few things are more moving than for a pastor to raise his hands in blessing over the people and pray them Godspeed in their journeys. It is the final word to the children of God as they re-enter the world. It should be encouraging, tender, and affirming, reminding them that they go with the covering hand of the Father and Shepherd.

Father, we ask your blessing as we leave this place. We have done our best to tell you that we love you, that we're grateful for your kindnesses, that we want to know more of you. We return to our homes and places of work with confidence in your promised care and guidance. Our expectation is that you will help us seize the hours before us to advance the work of your kingdom.

(And speaking to the congregation) Now may the love of Christ, the grace of the Father, and the power of the Spirit rest upon you throughout the days ahead. Amen.

What my friend the reporter/editor means when he says he needs a spiritual bath is that he is in need



of someone who knows how to pray for him, especially when he doesn't feel he can pray for himself. In the corporate prayers during worship, I have an opportunity to provide that sense of cleansing. But it will take time to plan, to think through my prayers, and to make sure each contains what both he and God ought to hear from me, the intercessor. Perhaps then he can return to the newspaper business on Monday ready to take on life in that world with a bit of kingdom power.

Holy Father, may those of us who are pastors and spiritual directors come to increasing appreciation of the rich privilege of holding the people up to you. Give us the insight that helps us understand their needs. Give us the faith that causes us to be confident in the power of intercession. Give us a vision of yourself and your majesty, and ourselves and our brokenness, that causes our prayers for the people to have reality and power, we ask in the name of Jesus. Amen. ■

Spiritual things are not to be boasted of. One can boast of worldly riches, and the paper money will not fly away unspent nor will the amount magically decrease, but the spiritual riches you boast of vanish with the telling.

— Watchman Nee